

February 14, 2021
Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Transfiguration—Year B
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

From last Sunday to this Sunday, we took a giant leap in Mark's Gospel: last week, we were at the beginning of the Gospel and the beginning of Jesus ministry; this week, we are at the point from which Jesus will turn toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Last week I talked about Jesus being both fully human and fully divine. I described several early Christian heresies and noted that early Christian theologians may have found it *easier* to accept his full *divinity*, and *harder* to accept his full *humanity*.

Read the Gospels, though, and you have to wonder whether Jesus' earliest followers had the opposite concern. That is, early Christ-followers may have found it *easier* to accept Jesus' full *humanity*, and *harder* to accept his full *divinity*. That would make sense. After all, many of those early Christ-followers would have known Jesus in the flesh, or at least known someone who knew Jesus in the flesh. They would also have known or known of others who claimed the power of miraculous healing or the power to prophesy. Those early Christ-followers knew that Jesus was different—they even came to believe that Jesus was God—and the Gospels give us the evidence.

Case in point: today's reading, the story of the transfiguration. For this epiphany, Jesus goes up to the mountain, taking with him Peter and James and John. You have to feel for Jesus if his most reliable crew members are Peter and James and John—this is same trio that will fail to meet Jesus' request to stay awake with him during the last night in Gethsemane. Apparently they're reliable enough, though. They witness Jesus' transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah are two of the most important figures in the Jewish tradition; here they likely represent the Law and the Prophets.

That mountaintop experience literally brings Jesus up to their level, but God doesn't leave it at that. In Chapter 1 of Mark, immediately after John baptized Jesus, a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's inferred there that only Jesus heard that voice. Here in Chapter 9, those words are nearly repeated: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" But now, there are three witnesses to those words.

Those witnesses are important. As the story continues we learn that Jesus doesn't intend to limit his Good News to his fellow Jews or to his time on Earth. God's new covenant is with the whole world. It's a message that those first Jewish Christ-followers must help take to the world. The Kingdom of God has drawn near to all creation. The spark of the divine will be denied to no one.

In Episcopal Church news, the big story over the last week or so had to do with the Washington National Cathedral, and last Sunday's preacher, Max Lucado.¹ Lucado is a hugely successful author—Wikipedia says that he's written nearly 100 books with some 130 million copies in print.² He's also a Christian pastor, of the conservative evangelical variety. In a 2004 sermon, he expressed his views about LGBTQ people, using the over-tired and yet ever-popular argument that same-sex marriage leads to legalized incest and bestiality. Regarding same-sex marriage, he posed a rhetorical question about what's next, and then answered it himself: "A marriage between a daddy and a daughter or a woman and giraffe? Don't underestimate the evil bent of the human heart."³ He also expressed support for the thoroughly debunked concept of gay conversion therapy.

When news of Lucado's preaching invitation broke earlier in the week, the outcry from LGBTQ Episcopalians and their supporters was swift and strong. In response, Cathedral Dean Randy Hollerith lifted up the importance of engaging with people with whom we disagree. Many replied that conversation across difference ought not to include offering up the most prestigious pulpit in the Episcopal Church to someone with such harmful views. He did not rescind that invitation. He did go on to invite retired Bishop Gene Robinson to preside at the service. You may remember that Bishop Gene was the first out gay person ordained bishop in the Anglican Communion, an event that resulted in huge fractures in the Episcopal Church and around the Anglican Communion.

Last Sunday, after what I understand was an innocuous sermon from Lucado—I didn't listen to it—Bishop Gene offered some words at the offertory, which I did watch. He said that, when it comes to LGBTQ people in the church, "We've won. We know how this is going to end."⁴ With all due respect to Bishop Gene, many of us are not so sure. Sure, we've come a long way, and yet. Even in the Episcopal Church, even in the Episcopal Church here in Connecticut, there are still many congregations that would never call an LGBTQ priest. In Christianity writ large, current conditions are even less encouraging.

Christianity's relationship with people who are LGBTQ has been much on my mind in recent months. I could point to the rise of white supremacy and Christian nationalism. We tend to notice that they're virulently anti-Black and anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant, but we sometimes forget that they also virulently anti-gay. Risk of violence to LGBTQ people was included in a national security warning that came out just a couple of weeks ago. I could also mention the shift in the makeup of the Supreme Court, whose majority members espouse a Christianity that would nullify my marriage to Jakki.

The news from the National Cathedral came a day or two after I was disturbed by another article. That one was about a Black pastor in Texas, Dwight McKissic, who had just removed the church where he serves as founding pastor from the Texas Southern Baptist Convention. He's threatening to remove the church from the entire Southern Baptist Convention—the national body. He took that action because a white Texas SBC pastor called our Vice-President “Jezebel Harris.” “Jezebel” has long been used as a pejorative for Black women. *Good*, I thought. But I read the whole article, and farther along I read that McKissic himself in 2015 had quite rudely compared a noted Black United Church of Christ pastor to Jezebel, because she is married to a woman.⁵ When asked about it, he said he didn't actually call her Jezebel—he likened her to Jezebel—and anyway, that's different.

All this is nothing new. Last August, I happened to hear the faith stories of two fairly prominent lesbians, both in their late 30s, both of whom grew up Roman Catholic. I like to think that folks twenty years younger than me had an easier time coming out; of course I should know better. One of the women is the comic Cameron Esposito. Esposito grew up in a devout Roman Catholic family; she attended Catholic schools, right through her undergraduate degree at Boston College. At one point she wanted to be a priest, knowing that wasn't going to happen. Her memoir published last year is titled *Save Yourself*. That title, *Save Yourself*, probably tells you everything you need to know about her current relationship with Christianity.

That other one of the two is soccer star Abby Wambach. I heard her interviewed on Nadia Bolz-Weber's podcast *The Confessional*. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a fairly well-known Lutheran pastor and author. In her podcast, she speaks with people who talk about something they did that they regret, and at the end she offers them a customized absolution. It's really pretty interesting, and the absolutions are always lovely. Wambach went on to “confess” her behavior during the breakup of her first marriage (which was to a woman), the drinking problem that developed after a soccer injury, and her DUI arrest, after which she spent the night in jail. I want to play part of that interview. I'll apologize in advance for the language that is a little bit crude.⁶ [*Play the episode from 13:45-16:34.*]

I expected that of the great things about serving at St. Thomas's would be its' proximity to a seminary. What I didn't expect was the number of LGBTQ seminarians who would come to speak with me about the internal struggle were still having with being queer and Christian. Most are in their 20s, some are in their 30s. Some come from Roman Catholic, some from fundamentalist backgrounds, some are even lifelong Episcopalians. Some were so far along as to be postulants for ordination as priests, and yet they were still struggling. Most had broken relationships with their families of origin. Most worried over their relationship with God. Most said something like this: “It's just so hard. Why do I have to be gay?” A lot of tears have been shed in my office over this: they cry when we're together, and I cry after they leave.

On Wednesday, both Dean Hollerith and Diocese of Washington Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde issued apologies for what they called the “mistake” of inviting Lucado to preach.⁷ They’re holding a listening session for LGBTQ folks and their supporters. I wish I felt more appreciative of that, but instead I remain baffled as to how it could be that they seem not to have been listening all along. In her apology, Bishop Mariann included comments from twelve of the people who wrote to her about this. I was going to read a couple of them, but this sermon is too long already. So I’ll refer you to them to read on your own.⁸ I’ll also refer you to a blog post by my former seminary professor, who is a theologian and gay man now serving in parish ministry. The title of that post is “Bad Theology Kills.”⁹

After the furor over his preaching gig, Lucado sent a letter to the Washington National Cathedral. He did not walk back his position on same-sex marriage or conversion therapy, but he did apologize for his words in 2004, saying this: “I was disrespectful. I was hurtful. I wounded people in ways that were devastating. I should have done better.” And he did say of LGBTQ people, “They are beloved children of God because, they are made in the image and likeness of God.”¹⁰ I guess he’s tossed us a bone—if a very dried up bone. But maybe God will put some flesh on it and breathe some life into it. By that I mean, maybe it will be enough, enough to provide a path to love—for a queer kid to love themselves, or for a family to love them.

Some years ago, I wrote a collect—a prayer—that I intended for use at an LGBTQ pride prayer service. It really applies to everyone. Remember, “the image of God” in Latin is *imago dei*. There’s another concept in Roman Catholicism, that in Latin terms every Roman Catholic priest is an *alter Christus*—that is, every priest is “another Christ.” I think that’s actually a useful concept, if it is applied to *all* members of the Body of Christ, *all* who are baptized into the priesthood of all believers, *all* who serve God by serving others. The prayer that I wrote includes this line: by your birth, you are *imago dei*; by your baptism, you are *alter Christus*.

It remains distressing to think that so much of the energy for anti-LGBTQ activism comes from my fellow Christians. It’s doesn’t have to be that way. It’s not the only way. It’s not even the Christian way.

So let’s return where we started, to that mountaintop, with Jesus and Moses and Ezekiel, with Peter and James and John. On that day, those three bumblers found themselves reflecting the light of Christ, human and divine. Maybe that light is simply love. Maybe love is what they witnessed, and love is what they carried into the world. And maybe it’s just as simple as that.

We, too, can embody love. We, too, can embody God. May it be so.

Notes

¹ David Paulsen, “National Cathedral Criticized for Inviting Max Lucado to Preach Despite Pastor’s Anti-LGBTQ Views,” *Episcopal News Service*, February 5, 2021, available at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/02/05/national-cathedral-criticized-for-inviting-max-lucado-to-preach-despite-pastors-anti-lgbtq-views/> (accessed February 14, 2021).

² “Max Lucado,” *Wikipedia*, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Lucado (accessed February 14, 2021).

³ I could not find the text of Lucado’s 2004 sermon. This quote from is in the *Wikipedia* article.

⁴ Robinson is quoted by David Paulsen in “Fallout from Washington National Cathedral Guest Preacher a ‘Teachable Moment’ for the Church,” *Episcopal News Service*, February 9, 2021, available at [Fallout from Washington National Cathedral guest preacher a ‘teachable moment’ for the church – Episcopal News Service](https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/02/09/fallout-from-washington-national-cathedral-guest-preacher-a-teachable-moment-for-the-church/) (accessed February 14, 2021). A video of Robinson’s remarks is on the Washington National Cathedral YouTube Channel, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7V3QH43LUM> (accessed February 14, 2021).

⁵ Brandi Addison, “Arlington Pastor Dwight McKissic Receives Racist Letter after Leaving Southern Baptists of Texas Convention,” *The Dallas Morning News*, February 3, 2021, available at [Arlington pastor Dwight McKissic receives racist letter after leaving Southern Baptists of Texas Convention \(dallasnews.com\)](https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2021/02/03/arlington-pastor-dwight-mckissic-receives-racist-letter-after-leaving-southern-baptists-of-texas-convention/) (accessed February 14, 2021).

⁶ Nadia Bolz-Weber and Abby Wambach, on the podcast *The Confessional with Nadia Bolz-Weber*, in the episode titled “Abby Wambach, Soccer Star,” dated August 18, 2020. It is available on Spotify.

⁷ See David Paulsen, “Washington Bishop, National Cathedral Dean Apologize for ‘Mistake’ of Letting Max Lucado Preach,” *Episcopal News Service*, February 10, 2021, available at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/02/10/washington-bishop-national-cathedral-dean-apologize-for-mistake-of-letting-max-lucado-preach/> (accessed February 14, 2021).

⁸ Mariann Edgar Budde, “Hearing From Those We’ve Hurt,” February 10, 2021, available at <https://www.edow.org/about/bishop-mariann/writings/2021/02/10/hearing-those-weve-hurt> (accessed February 14, 2021).

⁹ Jay Emerson Johnson, “Bad Theology Kills,” posted on his blog *Peculiar Faith*, February 8, 2021, available at <https://peculiarfaith.com/2021/02/08/bad-theology-kills/> (accessed February 14, 2021).

¹⁰ Max Lucado, in a letter to the Washington National Cathedral, February 11, 2021, as posted by *Episcopal News Service*, available at https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Max_Lucado_Letter_WNC.pdf (accessed February 14, 2021).