

The Rev. Jakki R. Flanagan
March 5, 2023
Second Sunday in Lent
St Thomas's Episcopal Church
New Haven, Connecticut

A few weeks ago, I attended the *very first* Eucharist of a new priest in our diocese. It was not only *a* *new priest*, it was our very own sponsee, that we, St. Thomas's New Haven, sponsored for ordination. She *was* our sponsee. Now she is The Church's priest, The Rev. Dr. Meg Stapleton Smith.

Meg was preaching on Transfiguration Sunday. You know, the one that has the reading where Jesus is literally transfigured in front of Peter, James, and John. Meg started off the sermon speaking about ontological change. Initially, how The Church believes that priests, through ordination, are changed...and later that the largest ontological change The Church believes in is Baptism.

So probably most of us have participated in this change.

As she spoke of her joy of being ordained a priest and the understanding of ontological change, she said:

*"The deep irony here is that I'm not very good at change...I love routine...So change has not always been a strength of mine. I tend to run from chaos, rather than embrace it. I want to organize things that are disorderly and in disarray. I love when things are set, secure, and in place. Traditionally I have felt safe when things are predictable. When I know what to expect. And honestly, that's because life is already chaotic, and scary, and overwhelming, and constantly changing. So, I'd rather keep things the same, when and where I can. Even though it's strange to admit, if given the chance between things changing and things remaining the same.... 9 times out of 10, I'd vote against change. Life is already chaotic, and overwhelming, and sometimes scary. There is safety in the predictable. In things remaining the same."*ⁱ

Later in the sermon she spoke of Peter's response to Jesus' transfiguration. How when Peter saw Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, he said:

*"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*ⁱⁱ

And then Meg said:

*"Of course Jesus had been fully human and fully divine the whole time...but in this moment his very nature is dramatically revealed to his closest friends. But here's the strange part, Peter, and James & John aren't excited about this. They don't exhale in relief and say, 'Thank goodness, we finally know who you are'...they fall to the ground in fear. A change has happened and it's terrifying. Life is already chaotic, overwhelming and sometimes scary. There is safety in the predictable and things remaining the same."*ⁱⁱⁱ

She continued with how, even Peter, who: “*truly knows Jesus... or thinks he does*”^{iv} is undone by this change, “*the way he knew and understood God has been altered*”^v and instead of embracing it, she states that Peter:

“tries to capture it, domesticate it, keep it the same. I’ll make three dwellings here one for you, Moses, and Elijah. You’ll stay here forever then, unchanged. Life is already chaotic, overwhelming and sometime scary. There is safety in the predictable and things remaining the same.”^{vi}

And I, can imagine Peter thinking, “I’m not really sure what is going on here, but it’s too much, too big, this change, so I’m gonna box you up Jesus, contain you in a way that makes sense for me, cause all this dazzling white stuff...well, it’s a bit over the top. I don’t know how to be with you in this change.”

Meg’s sermon reminded me of when a neighbor posted pictures on social media of a large Nativity set from the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany. The set was being repaired, and the pictures showed the different individuals of the set, undressed, on what looked like examining tables in their doctor’s office.

What is notable about the pictures is that Mary, Joseph, and two angels, have moveable body parts, kinda like large wooden marionettes.

What is also notable, is that the only one ***that isn’t*** moveable, the only one whose position can’t be changed, is the baby Jesus.

For some reason, in seeing this my mind jumped back to my seminary days.

One of the lovely things about attending the Episcopal seminary, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, in Berkeley, California, was that it was member of the Graduate Theological Union, which is comprised of something like 8 seminaries, and a few religious schools.

And as a member school, students could attend classes at any of the other seminaries/religious schools.

One semester I took a class, titled, *Death & Dying*, at one of the Catholic seminaries, run by the Franciscans. A few weeks in, I was wandering around their building, and saw a painting of Jesus...it was more like a head shot. And in this head shot, Jesus was laughing! It caught me up short, I was stunned by the sudden realization that:

I had *never* seen a painting of Jesus laughing...ever!

My first thought was –

“This is AMAZING!! Jesus is LAUGHING! Look how happy he is!!”

Followed quickly on its heels was my second thought, a buried but quickly rising to the surface thought,

“Is that ok? I mean...were talking about Death and Dying... and as a former Catholic, I remember Catholics often focus on Jesus’ suffering”...

And then came my third thought... “Wow – Look how stuck I am in this, somewhat singular idea of Jesus. That it feels beyond the pale to imagine Jesus laughing...I mean...sheesh, what am I afraid of...”

[PAUSE]

A recent article in the New York Times unveiled an unconscionable practice, that is not only horrific but also apparently growing in our country.

The article was about the hiring of young immigrant children to perform dangerous tasks.

The article states:

“These workers are part of a new economy of exploitation: Migrant children, who have been coming into the United States without their parents in record numbers, are ending up in some of the most punishing jobs in the country.”^{vii} {emphasis added}

It goes on to say:

“This shadow work force extends across industries in every state, flouting child labor laws that have been in place for nearly a century. Twelve-year-old roofers in Florida and Tennessee. Underage slaughterhouse workers in Delaware, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Children sawing planks of wood on overnight shifts in South Dakota....They run milking machines in Vermont and deliver meals in New York City... Middle and high school teachers in English Language Learners programs say it is now common for nearly all their students to rush off to long shifts after their classes end.”^{viii}

The article goes on to show how this exploitation touches everything, stating the children:

“...stitch in ‘Made in America’ tags into J.Crew shirts. They bake dinner rolls sold at Walmart and Target, process milk used in Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream, and help debone the chicken sold at Whole Foods.”^{ix}

It’s difficult to hear this...it’s difficult to *not* tune out when learning of this. It’s just so awful.

And I wonder, perhaps we all do...

just *how much* money do we need to make in our royally screwed up Capitalist system, and how does this seem okay to anyone...much less, okay to

So. Very. Many.

When do we say enough?

When do we take (air quotes) “radical measures” to reform these systems...to try and create something new, something we’ve never experienced before?

How do we even have faith that it’s possible?

In this season of Lent, a little stroll through the etymology of “Penitence”, goes down deep layers into:

“probably originally ‘is not enough, is unsatisfactory’... The basic meaning seems to be “missing, lacking.”^x

And we *clearly* are missing something. What is happening to immigrant children in our country is beyond unsatisfactory.

And yet, you know...We try so hard to get things right...take ourselves soooooo seriously. And then we fail...

...Or at least it *feels* like failing, by coming up short. **Though to be clear, this isn’t over yet.** But coming up short, missing the mark, especially in overfunctioning circles, can feel like complete and utter disaster.

Then perhaps the internal tapes start and we chastise ourselves:

- “Why did I say that?”
- “Why didn’t I think to...?”
- “When will we ever learn?”
- “How did we get here?”

We ride ourselves so hard, that
we have made Jesus in our own self criticizing image.

A Jesus that is either stern or suffering.
Either way, we feel we have let God down.

Then *we* shut down.

And there is failure.

And there is disappointment.

The eighth day.

We heard today in Genesis, God speaking to Abram:

“The LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...”

God said to *Abram* ... not “Abraham”... he was still “Abram”...

God said to *Abram,*

Leave all that you know and love.

Leave your family.

Leave your support system.

Leave the place...literally and let’s also say **metaphorically** - where you know how things work...for better or worse. I’m not saying you were leaving Eden, Abram...things weren’t always easy or good, but...they were known.

Leave all that is familiar...that feels secure, and go forth into the abyss.

But have faith.

You will take a new name. You will have a different identity.

You will be trans....*figured*

It will get better.

We *must* change our systems. Today, we’re discussing Capitalism, but it’s just one of many systems that requires change.

There’s a book, I haven’t read it yet, but whose description and title gives me hope:

Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire.

It’s by a famous Harvard Business School professor, Rebecca Henderson, and the description states that it:

“debunks prevailing orthodoxy with a new intellectual foundation and a practical pathway forward for a system that has lost its moral and ethical foundation. Free market capitalism is one of humanity’s greatest inventions...But this success has been costly. Capitalism is on the verge of destroying the planet and destabilizing society as wealth rushes to the top.” Henderson rejects: “the worldview that the only purpose of business is to make money and maximize shareholder value. She shows that we have failed to reimagine capitalism so that it is not only an engine of prosperity but also a system that is in harmony with environmental realities, the striving for social justice, and the demands of truly democratic institutions.”

Jesus calls us to change, individually **and** systemically. We are shown, through Peter, there is more to know, than what we *think* we know.

We need to radically reimagine our world, particularly our systems that try to keep things boxed in, marginalized, familiar, in the little tents of Peter’s proposal.

So, how do we unleash our imaginations to help us get there... while trying to keep up our hope in between the wonder and joy of, ordinations, baptisms, and radically reforming books of transformation???

What if, for the rest of this Lent... For Every – Single – Day, almost like opening the tabs on an Advent calendar, we invited ourselves to imagine a **different** kind of Jesus.

If we imagined not only a transfigured Jesus, but also a laughing Jesus... a **moveable** Jesus... a playful Jesus, a drinking a shot of espresso Jesus, a knitting another scarf Jesus, a CEO Jesus, a 12-year-old hammering nails into shingles on a roof Jesus, **an underage slaughterhouse worker Jesus...**

You fill in the blank. A **you name it** Jesus.

Yes...a **you/we** name it Jesus...

I know it might feel chaotic, overwhelming, and sometimes scary...

But how can we imagine a different world,
if we can’t even imagine a different Jesus.

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ⁱ Excerpt from The Rev. Dr. Meg Stapleton Smith's sermon, Feb. 19, 2023, St. Thomas's Church, Bethel, CT. Sermon begins at 19:19.

[February 14, 2023 | The Ordination of Margaret Mary Stapleton Smith | February 19, 2023 | Last Sunday after the Epiphany](#)
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ⁱⁱ Bible, Matthew 17:1-9. [Matthew 17:1-9 NRSVUE - The Transfiguration - Six days later, - Bible Gateway](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Excerpt from The Rev. Dr. Meg Stapleton Smith's sermon, Feb. 19, 2023, St. Thomas's Church, Bethel, CT. Sermon begins at 19:19.

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^{vii} New York Times, *Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across U.S.*, Feb 25, 2023, <https://nyti.ms/3IPNjD9>

^{viii} New York Times, *Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across U.S.*, Feb 25, 2023, <https://nyti.ms/3IPNjD9>

^{ix} New York Times, *Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across U.S.*, Feb 25, 2023, <https://nyti.ms/3IPNjD9>

^x Online Etymology Dictionary, [penitent | Etymology, origin and meaning of penitent by etymonline](#)