

## Experiencing Lent as Transfigured Disciples By Mother Miriam, CSM \*

The synoptic Gospels' story of Jesus' Transfiguration provides a fruitful opportunity for growth as disciples. In the Transfiguration, Jesus momentarily shows his true figure. His recognizable human appearance is his emptying of himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:5-9). He is not a new Elijah, nor a new Moses radiant with a borrowed glory. He is the manifestation of the living God himself. But even that statement is too simplistic.

"The vision of Christ is the transfiguration of man," said Michael Ramsey. If we are not always, continually, exquisitely sensitive to the other person, that statement looks like this: "My vision of Christ is my ultimate transfiguration." And in so doing, we lose the grace of seeing that the Transfiguration of Christ is just that, his transfiguration; and mine only as I become enfolded and incorporated into him. I cannot help but be reminded of Paul's frequent encouragement of those whom he made disciples: "We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

Have you ever used a magnifying glass to burn a hole in a piece of paper on a bright, sunny day? The glass focuses a narrow light beam, a form of energy, which by its greatness defies human sight. If you look directly at the sun, you will be blinded. But the brilliant spot beneath the magnifying glass is, in truth, the actual light of the sun, possessing the properties of the sun, and yet so limited that it can be observed by human beings without harm. The magnifying glass stands for the Incarnation; the spot of light, God-made-man, Jesus Christ; and the sun, the majesty of the Godhead.

It was possible for human beings to observe the actual nature, power, and goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and yet in such a limited form that they could bear it. As the moving of a cloud away from the path between us and the sun may change what was a vague light under a magnifying glass into a radiance too brilliant to be gazed upon, so at the moment of the Transfiguration the Godhead of the Son shone forth.

We can thank St. Luke for telling us how this happened: "As he was praying, the fashion of his countenance was altered." So it was that in prayer the union with God burst through Jesus in such intensity. It is in prayer that our fingers are nerved to hold the handle of that magnifying glass. We have the season of Lent to seek in prayer what our Lord would reveal to us: the glory of God in himself, as far as his love sees best for us. We must not decide beforehand that it can only be real if it comes in a certain way.

Now I want to draw your attention to the place of suffering in the experience of God. I can imagine that the three disciples were united in their bliss in seeing their Master absolutely glow and talking with Moses and Elijah. The disciples must have felt that they were amid some wonderful adventure in which glory passing into glory knows no end. Yet as they lay there, they heard of suffering and defeat.

For them and for us, it was a necessary lesson that this apparent failure to pass from glory unto glory was nevertheless the way of God. Luke 9:31 speaks of Jesus' exodus, recalling the Israelites' exodus from Egypt at the Red Sea as fulfilling of God's promise on one very scary night. In these few words, his exodus was spoken of as an achievement which Jesus was about to carry out, rather than a fate which he could not escape.

Can you see how a revelation was sent to the disciples concerning their own spiritual lives? It was perhaps the only thing which could have roused them from their depression and returned them to their ministry. Christ had revealed to them the nature of God, and now he revealed to them the experience of Emmanuel, "God with us," whereby suffering and Passion, transfigured, became life and victory.

The question which is put to us by the Transfiguration is not: "Can there be any suffering in the revelation of God?" but rather: "Can there be any revelation of God without suffering?" We, looking at our own suffering on this earth, see only its ugliness, its hindrance, its loss; but plunged in the glory of the revelation of God in Christ, that suffering becomes itself a source of light, of glory, and of hope; and entering into the revelation of God in suffering, with Christ by our side, emerges from there as triumph.

If you are to have any experience of God, you must gather up the sufferings of your life, however small, and bring them to be transfigured in the revelation of Christ. See them no longer as weights hung upon you, but instead as molds which are shaping you. Placed in the light of the Transfiguration, every suffering of your life becomes part of an “exodus” — whereby you pass into the kingdom of God.

This is one of the hardest tasks in life because it means the changing of our viewpoint. It is one thing to see this, but another to do it. In practice it means that you must change your thoughts about what you find hardest in your life. Instead of thinking of it as a nuisance or a hardship, think of it as an opportunity, as something to be offered to Christ. Instead of talking about it to others, talk about it to our Lord. Instead of feeling that it throws you back on yourself, feel that it unites you to God. Instead of seeing it as an excuse for depression, see it as the promise and hope of taking up your cross and following Christ.

*Mother Miriam, CSM, is Mother Superior of the Eastern Province of the Community of Saint Mary and lives in Greenwich, New York.*

**\*Before reading this article, read the account of Jesus’ Transfiguration in one of the gospels (Matt. 17:1-8, see below the questions, or Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36.)**

### **Questions:**

1. What kinds of suffering might the disciples have been bringing up the mountain that day? Use your imagination. Family, relationships, money, struggles with calling or health — what would you have been bringing with you?
2. How can a Lenten practice help you to deal with pain, uncertainty, disappointment, or loss in a way that gives you a different angle on them, so that they become less of a burden? Less “fate” and more circumstances under which you may have the opportunity to be transfigured?
3. How can the practice of prayer aid in experiencing Christ “by our side,” even in the most painful situations? Have you ever seen this happen, for you or someone else?
4. Is there anything about this article that was difficult for you? Or any place the Holy Spirit may be prompting you? Write, pray about it, or discuss it with a mature Christian friend.

### **\*Matthew 17: 1-8:**

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’ <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

## A Lenten Crucifix By Tom Gray

On the mantle in my office is an unusual-looking crucifix. It is very intricately done, white with blackened places on it that look like smudges, and is somewhat top-heavy. If you were to look at it closely, you would see that it is made from white plastic forks and spoons. I see it every day, of course, but during Lent, and especially Holy Week, it always becomes oddly more visible to me, sometimes almost as a presence.

It was made for me by a man who was in the maximum security unit — cell block, 3 we called it — in the state penitentiary at a time when I was the chaplain. He spent 22 out of every 24 hours in a six-by-nine-foot concrete cell with a steel bar across the front. If you looked at his inmate record in the prison files, it would tell you that he had a long history with the legal system, that he had most recently been sentenced to the penitentiary — a maximum security men's institution — for a series of felonies, and that while there he continually got into trouble for one thing or another and was sent to cell block 3 as punishment for several weeks each time. On paper he was clearly a volatile, sometimes dangerous man.

If, however, you talked with him directly, you would see a quite different person, and hear a quite different story. He grew up in a very poor, abusive family, and came to adulthood with little education and a “vocation” as a dealer in drugs and stolen goods. He had a wife and children on the outside but had lost contact with them at their choice. He didn't know his father, had a touching respect and concern and love for his mother, and a surprisingly mystical relationship with the Lord.

I saw him at least weekly in cell block 3, and got to know him in that odd and guarded intimacy that was typical of the place. I found him to be a person caught up in a very difficult paradox. The skills needed to thrive in the prison are antisocial — aggression, intimidation, gang affiliation, violence, self-centeredness, dominance over others, constant vigilance. He was trying hard not to become caught up in such institutional behavior; rather, to be what he described as “God-fearing,” and to practice the social skills of sharing life with others that are used in normal, productive human relationships. The only way he could do that was in isolation from other inmates, so whenever necessary he would do something that would get him written up and put into cell block 3. And it was there that he and I came to know each other.

I had seen a crucifix he made for another inmate, and told him in passing one day that I admired it. It was strikingly and painstakingly done, and he was eager to tell me how he did it. The Lord's face was done first from the bowl of a white plastic spoon, and from that he worked outward to a corpus made from the tines of plastic forks on a cross made from spoon handles, and surrounded by lilies made from the bowl of spoons and palm fronds made from fork tines all welded together by melting joints with paper-board matches which he was allowed to have in limited quantity.

During Holy Week that year, he called for me through one of the guards, and when I got there, he presented me with a crucifix he had made for me — the one on my mantle. I was very touched, especially since prisoners give very little away for nothing. That crucifix has come to be unavoidably associated with Lent and Holy Week for me. Every year in some way or another it comes to mind and stands there as a symbol of that one man's near futile struggle to be “God-fearing” in such a contrary environment.

We — all of us — live in a similar, though not so extreme, paradox. What the world values and the skills that it most regards are quite different from those that the Lord calls out of us. And in no time of the year is that difference more visible than in Lent and Holy Week. We are called to be people of the Spirit in a world that values power more, servants in a world that seems self-serving. And that strange, fragile crucifix in my office from an unlikely person in an unlikely place is just one of many reminders that I have been given that the risen one stands in our midst as a beacon, offering life through death, hope through failure, meaning out of nonsense.

*The Rev. Tom Gray (1941-2020) retired from Grace Church, Carlsbad, New Mexico, after serving many years as an Episcopal priest*

## Questions

1. “We are called to be people of the Spirit in a world that values power more, servants in a world that seems self-serving.” How do we live the Christian calling within the sinful structures, disappointments, and ambiguities of the world? Is there a place where this task is particularly difficult for you?
2. What do you see in the inmate’s crafted crucifix? Are there images or objects within your life that help you navigate the difficulty and pain of living well, of receiving “meaning out of nonsense”?
3. Are there any special objects that are helping you this Lent, such as a holy image, a quote, a souvenir from a meaningful time or place, or a piece of jewelry? Consider making one, or setting one on display in a special place, to remind you of God’s help and grace and to encourage you.

## The Indwelling By Katherine Clark

It was the night of his arrest. Supper was over. The friends were silent, waiting for an end they could not name, filled with questions they dared not ask. Throughout the meal, the Master had spoken of his death, told them that the bread he blessed was his very body given for them, the wine his blood poured out for them and all the world. He had spoken first of betrayal, then of denial. They were hurt, bewildered — oppressed by sorrow.

They knew he would leave them. They were frightened by his talk of dying. He tried to comfort them, but the words were puzzling, not comforting at all. Not until after the Resurrection would they begin to understand. “It is necessary that I go away,” the Lord told them. “But I will not leave you comfortless. I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit, who will help you and be with you always.” Later he said, “The Spirit will be with you and will live in you.” Then, he continued: “If a person loves me and keeps my word, then my Father will come to him, and we will make our abode with him.”

Think what has been promised here. First, we have been promised the Holy Spirit, to be with us and in us. We have been promised that the Father and the Son will make their abode with us, and finally that we ourselves will be one with Jesus, who is one with God. The life of the blessed Trinity will be within us, present in our very souls. An astonishing promise. An astonishing destiny.

This, of course, is the promise that undergirds all our life — and yet nothing is harder to hold!

This promise cannot be proved. It cannot be accounted for by logic. Like love itself, this promise can be known only by experiencing it.

I am in the evening of my life. There was such a long time when I would hear Paul’s words, “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me,” and each time shake my head, knowing these were not words I could say, not knowing how to make them real, and longing for nothing more than this enormous gift, this enormous grace.

And then one day without warning I simply knew. These words were mine to say, not just Paul’s. “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” I was at Pleshey, in England, where Evelyn Underhill gave so many retreats and quiet days. It was evening. I found myself in the midst of a garden, perfumes strange and sweet hung in the air. Before me fields of gold rippled and shimmered, meeting a sky drenched with color, dyed with sunset. The air was so still about me — a few bird calls in what seemed an almost soundless place. To me the very endlessness of the fields, the very hugeness of the sky, seemed an image of eternity. It was as if I had stepped for that moment into another dimension. And I knew Christ was there, about me, above me, within me, I in him, he in me — not in the measure St. Paul knew, but in the measure I could receive, and just as true.

Dear people, this promise of the indwelling presence, this promise of Christ’s life in ours, ours in his, is God’s promise. And God’s promise is not conditional, not on God’s part. The words of this promise are comforting, familiar. And what they say is radiant, too bright to be looked at directly. “These words are too wonderful for me,” the psalmist says. And, of course, they are.

Our lifelong temptation is to live as if we were operating on our own strength, only aided by God when we need a little boost. But trying to operate on our own strength is settling for far too little. God would give us much more than this. He would give us himself, fully present, fully active. Knowing that God is present does not shield us from tragedy. Knowing God is present does not shield us from the hard patches in life that come to all of us. A job is lost, a divorce happens, a parent dies, or a beloved child, or the spouse whose love upheld us — these times are very hard. We walk into them as into the valley of the shadow. These are the desert times — the days are endless, and yet, incredibly, the desert itself is waiting to bloom.

“God doesn’t need our words,” a saint reminds us. “The parched soil by its cracks opens itself to the rain and invites it. The parched soul by its wounds cries out to the living God.” These words ring very true. Under each new showering of grace, the desert of our hearts blooms again. It is indeed the pattern of our lives.

And, of course, tragedy is not the only seedbed. “The spirit’s tidal ebb and flow” is something we all know, and know too well. In these long times that seem to come to all of us, we wander the desert of our own hearts like the children of Israel in the wilderness. In these long times, we know our own helplessness, and yet God is there, watching for the cracks, waiting to shower our souls. He knows the desert will bloom again, even when we do not.

God dwells in us by his choice. But we know him there by ours. Jesus himself is the strength of our strength — he who once shared the weakness that is our common lot. He is the courage of our courage — he who knew in our own flesh the terror of Gethsemane. He is the hope of our hope — he who at the very last, “robed in flesh, our great high priest,” could say with confidence, “It is finished,” and “Into thy hands I commend my spirit,” words of perfect trust to the Father whose will he had perfectly fulfilled.

Ah, dear people, what do we do with all this? The words are too wonderful for us. Only this, I think: Live, and know ourselves dearly loved. Put on the whole armor of God, and know our inmost selves guarded behind and before, regardless of any circumstance that befalls us. This very God adored by angels and archangels and all the company of heaven has mysteriously, wonderfully chosen us. By his grace and in his mercy, may we also choose him, daily, newly, always. Amen.

*Katherine Clark is a retired lay canon of the Episcopal Church and the widow of the Rev. Forrest B. Clark, former rector of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Valparaiso, Indiana*

### **Questions:**

1. “It is necessary that I go away. But I will not leave you comfortless.” How have you experienced this paradox in your life: God’s loving, persistent presence in the midst of tragedy, pain, or struggle?
2. How do Jesus’ promises — of the Holy Spirit, of God’s power within us, and of being transformed into Christlikeness — resonate even as we suffer? Is it more difficult for you to accept suffering and hardship, or to accept grace and comfort?
3. What might it look like within your life for the “desert of [your] heart to bloom”?