



Transfiguration



A Sermon By
The Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey

March 3, 2019
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Transfiguration Sunday

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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My name is Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey. I'm an ordained pastor in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, and the president of an organization called the Religious Institute that works at the intersection of sexuality, religion, and public policy. I often say that my job is to talk about religion, sex, and politics and don't you want to invite me home for dinner?

The transfiguration is such a mystical story, isn't it? Jesus is praying, his face and his clothing change, the disciples are like, "Whoa," and "Who is this?" And then Elijah and Moses show up and then there's a cloud and the God speaks and says the same thing God said at Jesus' baptism – "this is my child, my Chosen One," and God adds "listen to him" and then it's all over and they all clammed up because really what are you going to say after something like that.

And I'll just be candid here. I like to explain things. I'm a linear thinker and I like rational explanations. Not only that, I am very, very good at explaining things. One of my gifts is an ability to take something complicated or mysterious and break it down and explain it in a way that people understand and with which they can identify.

I say all of that to tell you that my first instinct when confronted with a passage like the transfiguration story is to explain it away. It's to ignore the overwhelming brightness of Jesus' appearance, and the fact that Peter, James and John went up a mountain and saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus and heard a voice from heaven.

I have actually preached a sermon on the transfiguration that encouraged people to come down off the mountain and do the real work down in the valley. Which was probably fine at the time but didn't really address what the heck happened up there.

We need the stories of transfiguration and mystery and prayer, because we need the hope that they provide that the world can be holy and beautiful and better than it is. We need to see the moments of transfiguration in our own lives too and believe them for what they are, even when we can't explain them or hold on to them.

Many years ago, when I first came out as not straight, I couldn't imagine a scenario where I would be proclaiming the deepest truths about myself and advocating for justice from pulpits and megaphones. At the time, I was a public-school teacher. The threat of being found out as someone in a relationship with a person of the same sex was loss of my job and most likely my ability to get any other teaching job.

I spent a lot of energy being fearful and anxious. Then one day a student came to see me to ask if I would help her start a Gay Straight Alliance at our school. I knew why she chose me to ask. I knew that she knew why she chose me to ask. I knew that parents and administrators and all kinds of folks would also know why she chose me. I was scared. I didn't want to lose my status or my job. I was not ready for this particular transfiguration.

I tried to dissuade her. I told her that we had tried this once before and it had blown up in our faces. (True). There had been newspaper columns and the school board had gotten involved and it had all devolved into a generic and ineffective "diversity club." I told her that she might end up being outed to her mom. I thought I had dissuaded her. But the next day she came back to my classroom. "I came out to my mom and I wrote this letter to the school board. When can we start?" There was the mystery, completely unexpected, of this young prophet showing up in her school and the sound God's voice compelled me to listen to her.

And so the dazzling light of something new shone in a big public high school in a small town. Kids who had been pushed to the margins, spat on, shoved into lockers, beaten, humiliated and ridiculed moved to the center of my attention. As an advisor to the GSA, I was practically outed to anyone who cared to notice. And yet the sky did not fall. I did not lose my job, nor did anyone else. I enjoyed a huge amount of stability and privilege that I hadn't even realized. Trusting the mystery turned out to be safe.

The same was not true for my queer students, however. I spent more time sitting in the hallway with crying LGBTQ kids than I would have thought possible. And to a person, they were all distraught because of the teachings of conservative Christianity. Some were rejected by their parents. Others were rejected by their churches. For some it was both. One young man was told he had to choose between president of the GSA and being part of his church theater group. (He chose the GSA.) It seemed that no matter how often, how passionately, how cogently I talked with them about the Christian faith that informed my life and my heart and my teaching, these kids were still going to feel the need to ask me, "Am I going to hell?"

That's a large piece of the reason I went to seminary. I didn't know just what I was going to do, but I knew that I wanted the world to be different for those kids, and for everyone, and I knew that Jesus was calling me away from the familiar into something new and, quite frankly, scary. And so, I took that leap of faith, and walked into the mystery. Well, it may be that more like Peter and John and James, I was sort of dragged along for the ride, but God does what God can with what God has to work with.

We need stories like the transfiguration so that we can remember that God is beyond our understanding and our ken – that God can show up on a mountain and cause God's children to be dazzlingly bright, bring the prophets and the sages, and remind us of our belovedness, and we don't have to understand it. We just have to believe that transfiguration is possible.

This belief in what is possible, and what religion has to offer us is at the heart of what we do at the Religious Institute. We're a national, multifaith nonprofit organization. We offer prophetic, moral leadership at the intersection of religion and sexual, gender, and reproductive justice. We work with people of faith to create a future where sexuality and spirituality are integrated; where no one is shamed or silenced because of their gender, sexuality, or reproductive decisions; and where religion is used to promote the common good.

I do this work because I know that until we start having honest conversations about sex in church we're going to continue to see brokenness and hurt around sexuality and gender – LGBTQ kids driven to suicide, people shamed for their decisions around their reproductive health, hundreds of pastors accused of sexual abuse and misconduct, with institutions working hard to cover it up.

I also do this work because our lives and our bodies are holy and beautiful. Because we can co-create a more just world and religion offers us tools to do that. Because we as people of faith have something helpful to offer the world when we talk about sexuality and gender. Because as a Christians, our God chose to become human and experience life as one of us – experiencing all the joys and challenges of being a sexual being and reminding us that our very bodies are sacred.

But most of all, I work for social justice – for sexual, gender, and reproductive justice – because I believe in the mystery of transfiguration. I don't know how it happens, but I know that God's voice is speaking to and about all of us when God says from the cloud, "This is my child, my Chosen. Listen!"