



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Come and be transfigured”
Last Epiphany – March 2, 2025
Luke 9:28-36

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

This morning we have an invitation to come to the mountain with Jesus, with his two best friends. Come. Step into the cloud with Jesus. Come. Tremble at the voice of God. Come. Behold the glory of God reflected on Jesus's face. Come. And be transfigured. Come. And go back down the mountain changed forever. My friends, the church is the place of transfiguration.

Be assured that both Jim or I have preached the transfiguration many times before. I know that I have seven times. And we will have the opportunity to study and reflect on this Gospel reading again, even this year, because the transfiguration falls in our lectionary in August. But we always hear today's Gospel story the last Sunday of Epiphany. Why? I believe it is to prepare us to be transformed, to be transfigured, if you will, in Lent.

This week I stumbled upon an essay by one of my favorite writers – Garrison Keillor. If you ever listened to his Saturday night radio show “A Prairie Home Companion” you will recognize his manner of speaking. I feel compelled to share his musings about last week's Gospel reading where Jesus taught us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us. His musings these days are not about the fictitious place called Lake Wobegon and her people, but rather about himself and the Episcopal Church. Here are his words which I think might help us to get through the next several months and should encourage us to bring a friend to church with us, because wherever we are we will be church. This is Garrison Keillor's story entitled:

“Sunday morning, so help me, God.”

“I seldom invite friends to come to church with me and, after Sunday's morning service that was so deeply moving, I don't know why. If you knew a great bakery, you'd tell people. If you read a great book, you wouldn't keep it a secret. But off I truck to the West Side of

Manhattan and in the big door past the greeters, drop my two cents in the offering plate, head altarward, stop at my pew, genuflect and bow, and take my seat.

The genuflection disturbs my fundamentalist ancestors. I can hear them mutter, “Oh please, not that again.” Genuflection they regard as Catholic, papist, alien to the pure faith, and my Anglican church they consider decaffeinated Catholicism, and though I love my ancestors, I tell them to shove off. I know my own heart. This is my home.

I glance at the bulletin and see that I am going to weep this morning because Brother John the organist has chosen my mother’s favorite hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul,” for a Communion hymn. John has brought up our congregation to be a singing congregation; he does this by playing softly and tenderly and relaxing the tempo. Sometimes we sound rather magnificent. Such as in the opening hymn, acolytes processing, candles in hand, the deacons and clergy, all of them women, and we sing “Trust and Obey” at full volume, even I who am neither trustworthy nor obedient.

We acknowledge God from whom no secrets are hid, we recite the Creed, and we acknowledge that we have opposed God’s will in our lives. We are absolved and turn to the people around us, blessing them, and we go forward for Communion, and the Communion hymn reduces me to rubble:

*Lord, lift me up, and let me stand
By faith on heaven’s tableland,
A higher plane than I have found.
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

My voice shakes and I feel tears on my cheeks, asking my Creator to raise me above the clutter and the cross-talk, the chit-chat, the crapola, and face the heavenly eternal, and accept the unbelievable fact of the faith, that God gave Himself to suffer humiliation and death for our sins. We all do this together. It isn’t a show, we don’t come to admire somebody’s talent and wit, we are joined in one body for each other’s sustenance and inspiration.

The Gospel this morning is one I’ve heard a hundred times, “Do unto others as you wish the bastards would do unto you,” and this is no piece of cake. It says: *Love your enemy, bless those who curse you. If someone takes your coat, let them have your shirt too. Do not judge, do not condemn.* What the hell? I do not love my enemy. [Do the people of the

Ukraine really love their enemy?]) I don't think so. But this apparently is what Jesus said, that I should lovethe one.... who is cutting American aid to starving people in Africa.

So I'll take that home and wrestle with it for a while. I have confessed my sins as a poor father, a distracted husband, an absentee citizen, and now I recognize my ignorance of the Golden Rule, but then the organ sweeps us into "It Is Well With My Soul" and I weep openly while singing bass:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way
And sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

And I see my mother, Grace, at the piano in the living room and her six children singing the words. She canned dozens of quarts of stewed tomatoes, green beans, apple sauce, from the garden, and she fixed pot roast and she vacuumed and changed the beds, she laughed at my jokes, and she also played the piano... "It is well with my soul." It's her song.

I listen to the postlude and shake hands with the rector, thank John for the hymns: it's not easy to make me weep, I am not that sort of sensitive male, I'm a comedian, this is the work that God has sent me out into the world to do, and I am grateful for the commission. I walked into church thinking about deadlines and the news and my aged ailing pals and I walk out into the sunshine, feeling shaken, raised up, grateful for the love of God and the people around me. I wish you'd come with me sometime."

My friends, Garrison Keillor was transformed, he was transfigured last week at St. Michaels' Episcopal Church at 99th Street and Amsterdam Avenue on Manhattan's Upper West Side in New York City. He came to church worried about what he had heard in the news and about his family and friends who are old and ill, and he left transformed, raised up by the love of God and the people around him in church.

We too came here today to be the church. But I claim that we too are being transformed, transfigured, by the love we experience here – God's love and the love of one another. Let us not be the best kept secret in town. Let us be the transforming people of St. Andrew's and

welcome others to get to know the peace and love we have found that rolls over us like the waves on the beach here in Destin. Let us show what Episcopalians can do when we stick together being the church wherever God leads us. Let's share it, and it will be well with our souls. And let us invite others to walk this uncertain road with us because it is paved with love.

Lord, may it be true. Amen.

Lift every Voice and Sing Hymn 188

1. When peace, like a riv - er, at - tend - eth my
1. way, When sor - rows like sea - bil - lows roll;
1. What - ev - er my lot, thou hast taught me to
1. say, It is well, it is well with my soul.
It is well with my soul, It is well with my
soul, It is well, it is well with my soul.
soul,

Text: Horatio Spafford (1828-1888)
Music: Philip P. Bliss (1838-1876)