

“Real Change”, sermon on Luke 9: 28 – 36, The Transfiguration – February 21, 2016

Can people change?

When I first met Stacy, she was a 17 year old, greatly gifted singer and actress, auditioning for a new young persons theatre troupe I co-founded with a friend in Barrie several years ago. Stacy sang like an angel, making it seem effortless yet always sang with heart and feeling. Her home environment was not happy, not safe, and she rented an apartment with another girl from the theatre company. Soon, the money got tight and in desperation, she accepted a job waitressing at a strip club. Before too long, she was performing there. The money was outstanding, hundreds in cash every night, but she was miserable, now using drugs to numb her waking hours, wondering how she got into this and how to get out.

I met George when he was a regular at my first charge in Toronto. I don't mean a regular attender; he came regularly for assistance. He was hunched and weary, with glazed over, bloodshot eyes from too much drinking, and his face was worn out, like a roadmap of all that he'd been through in his life and all the places from which he'd been forced to move on. I've rarely seen a sadder man in my life but he spoke of being trapped.

Can people change? We're nicely into the season of Lent, the season of personal reflection and honest contemplation of our relationship with Christ, our notions of the nature of God, and our dig-down-deep understanding of our *very real need* for their grace and redemption. Lent is traditionally the time to give up something – not so much in the Presbyterian tradition, however it's not a bad discipline for us to adopt. But it's got to hurt! It's got to be a genuine sacrifice. You can't give up Brussel sprouts if you don't eat them anyway. So I always give up ... CHOCOLATE, and this year, I've added bread. Rev. Ed has given up all sweets and desserts, and Sonia, I believe, is giving up cheese. We do it because every time we want that item, every time I crave chocolate which only happens when I'm breathing, I'm reminded of how good life is, how abundant it is in terms of what *really* matters, and that Jesus died to make it so.

So Lent can be about change, giving up bad habits to embrace healthier living. But it's about far more than just feeling deprived occasionally, or getting some pounds off, or tightening up some wobbly bits. We're people of faith; we're called to attempt the tough stuff by drawing from His strength, and that includes striving to become the people God really intends us to be.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, when Jesus changed right in front of Peter, James and John, and the voice of God was heard from the cloud that engulfed them. But let's be very clear and not water down this event with our own anecdotes of self improvement. Mortals cannot change in the same way Jesus changed on the mountaintop that night. This event was astounding and belongs solely to Jesus as part of His story on earth.

Having said that, I owe you an apology. It is the preacher's job, in part, to bring relevancy to ancient scripture, to show how the stories and teaching from the Bible come to bear on our lives today. So forgive my failing here – there is no human experience that relates directly to the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. We cannot claim a parallel event. The only one to come close in scripture is Moses, who was *physically* altered by his encounter with God even though the Almighty tried to shield Moses from His full glory by hiding in a flaming tree, never consumed. In Exodus 34, Moses' face is described as “radiant”, beaming bright after being in God's presence. It was so bright no one could even look at him and he took to wearing a veil when in the presence of the other humans. Such is the magnitude of God's glory, far too much for mortal eyes to witness.

Consider the description of Christ during His conversation with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. The place is not specified, unimportant apparently or we'd be sure to have a scriptural record. Often in our studies, it's significant to note what is *left out* as well as what is included in the Bible. It seems our Lord wants us to focus on the event rather than become distracted by geography.

Jesus is doing what He does so very often → He's praying. There is no way to exaggerate the importance of prayer in our lives. I know that you know that but here it is again, our Saviour praying. Then His appearance is described as undergoing a change. Not a different expression on His face but a new face as His features change. And his clothing, His being, became as "lightening" in one translation – a fantastic and terrifying image.

This must have confirmed for Peter, James and John, as it does for us, that Jesus is of Heaven, discussing and planning for His mortal fate with the immortal likes of Moses and Elijah, the embodiments of the Law and Prophets. Together they discuss His "departure". In Greek, it's another word for 'death', but these three know the difference – Jesus will leave, but He will not die.

His transfiguration is only super-natural and other-worldly according to our limited, earthly perspective. Jesus doesn't become something or someone new and different in these moments. Rather, His authentic *real* nature is revealed. God disguised Himself in flesh to be among us, clothed His true divinity and radiant glory in skin hung on a bony frame, but in *this* moment, all is revealed. Christ is tangible divinity, charged with power & glowing righteousness, warm and irresistible love and grace, not as nebulous concepts but in *actual fact*. He doesn't change in this story; He changes us!

As ever, HIS limitless power, as witnessed during the transfiguration, is our strength for becoming our true, authentic, *real* selves as children of God. Stacy found that power and made the change to her real self. A neighbour saw her coming and going at strange hours, entertaining shady characters, and seeing how sad and lost she looked. She invited Stacy to church, where she heard a message of forgiveness and hope, and found a sense of belonging she'd not known before. It was frightening to leave the world she'd come to know – even a world so destructive had become comfortable for her. But she met Jesus, who helped her to start again. Stacy is now a Mom in Newmarket, singing in her church choir every Sunday and trying to live out God's intention for her.

George stopped coming to the church for a very long while and we were getting worried about him, but had no way to contact a transient man on the streets. A fellow came knocking one afternoon, looking for some help and I invited him in. He talked a bit too candidly about his experiences, his rehabilitation and his new home. Pretty quick to trust me, I thought. He just needed a little help until his first paycheck came. He spoke as though he knew me and finally it dawned – this was George! But this man was taller, he had more hair and bright eyes and he was much younger. He had been to Teen Challenge and his life was changed in ways he couldn't have imagined a year ago. This was the real George, not the down-trodden fellow I met before, but this hopeful, happy man who spoke with regained purpose.

Lent is about change for the better. Where in your life do you need to make a change, a *real* change? Not surface or cosmetic, not lip service, not obligatory, but genuine, intentional, courageous, sustainable change on the journey to becoming our best selves as God's creations? Are we content, or more importantly, is God content with us, in every area of our lives? Are we bringing Him delight and glory through our pursuits? Maybe it's well past time to shake up our faith, to recommit to our spiritual health and adopt a new practice that will bring us closer to our Creator and Redeemer. Maybe we need to ask our Lord to help us remodel our hearts to be more kind & patient, more gracious & forgiving of self and others, slower to judge, quicker to apologize, less demanding & critical, more grateful & understanding, brave enough to do what is right & good, strong enough to be gentle.

Do we trust God enough to allow Him to transform us, our faith, our lives? Witness the transfiguration - Christ holds the power to do anything, wherever we have need. Even if the only change we need to make is to believe in His love and to accept His grace. Amen.