

A Change is Gonna Come

How is everyone doing with their New Year's Resolutions? Is anyone totally rocking them? Has anyone dropped the ball already? Well, if you, like me, have already fallen back into old habits, then you are in good company. According to an article in Forbes, only 8% of people actually achieve the New Year's Resolutions they make.

But, do not worry, my friends. There is still hope! For those of you who might be looking for a resolution do-over, Lent starts this week. And while Lent will not turn back time and bring us back to the beginning of January, it does give us the opportunity to give something up, take something on or participate in some sort of spiritual practice or discipline. It gives us all the opportunity to say, "Okay, maybe I was not able to make an entire year, (or even two months,) but this Lenten season – for 40 days – I can try again."

The practice of giving something up for Lent is not necessarily a Protestant tradition, (in fact, I think I have mentioned this before, but growing up I was always envious of my Catholic friends who "got" to give something up, because it seemed so cool and hardcore). But I would argue that lately there has been a rise of Protestants seeking to reclaim this ancient custom as a way of creating a more meaningful Lenten experience for themselves.

Customarily, Christians would give something up for Lent as a way of connecting whatever sacrifice they were making with the penitential nature of the Lenten season. In a way, they would induce their own small suffering as a way of honoring Jesus' great suffering.

But more than that – and I think this is why lately Christians have started to reclaim the practice – Lenten traditions have always been about taking part in some sort of spiritual discipline that can act as a catalyst for change in a person's life.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which is all about change. Transfiguration Sunday is the last Sunday before Lent begins. We hear the story of Jesus' transfiguration, where he took Peter, James and John up on a mountain and literally changed right in front of them. His face shone brightly, his clothes became dazzling white and suddenly Moses and Elijah were standing next to him. A cloud then appeared and God's voice was heard saying, "This is my Beloved; with him I am well pleased, listen to him."

The lectionary pairs the story of Jesus' transfiguration with the Exodus story where God sent Moses to Mount Sinai to receive the law. We do this, not only because Moses was one of the men that appeared with Jesus at the transfiguration, but also because it was in this story – where Moses received the law – that Moses had an experience of his own that changed him. It is in both of these stories that God is not only revealed to individual people, but individual people are changed by this revelation of God as well.

In the original Greek, the word used when talking about the transfiguration is metamorphoo, which means, "transfigured, transformed and changed in form." It refers to an inner transformation that appears on the outside. The transfiguration of Jesus was a literal change that happened to him that the disciples could see on the outside; but there was very much a change that happened within him on the inside as well.

The Lenten practice of giving something up is often a change people can see on the outside – but it almost always changes someone on the inside.

Talking about transfiguration, about metamorphoo, prepares us for the Lenten season because it is in reading this text that we bear witness to the story of a God-sized change in the Gospel narrative.

And so today, I ask you to think about this question: How will you be changed throughout this Lenten season?

There was a show I loved called trading spaces where two couples swapped houses for two days to change a space in the others house. I loved that show because I love a good before and after.

I believe that the church gives us some of the greatest before and afters because it is in the business of changing lives. Yes, we come to church to praise God and live out the Gospel, but we also come so that our lives might be changed. After all, God is in the business of personal transformation.

Peter, James and John bore witness to an outward change in Jesus at the transfiguration and this opened their eyes to see the true power of who Jesus was on the inside. But I would be willing to bet that this experience also opened their eyes to the possibilities within themselves, to the promise that they, too, could experience a powerful and God sized change in their own lives.

So, again, I ask this question: How will you be changed throughout this Lenten season? God sized changes are possible in our lives, as well; changes that start on the inside and changes we might even see on the outside.

In re-reading the story of the Transfiguration this week, I was particularly struck by the moment where Peter, James and John were overcome with fear and fell to the ground and Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid." This phrase kept running through my head, because it is one we see over and over again in the Bible. We heard it at Christmas; the Angel Gabriel said it to Mary and later in the story, the angels said it to the shepherds. I read that the phrase "Do not be afraid" appears 70 times in the Bible and that does not include variations such as "fear not," or "don't fear."

Change can be a really scary thing, but time and time again, our faith teaches us that we do not have to be afraid. Lent give us a safe space where we can jump blindly into the darkness of the unknown and make feasible and attainable changes in our lives. We do not have to be afraid; God is with us and we are surrounded by the Body of Christ within our church community. Sometimes it takes a village and our church not only holds us accountable, but also supports us on this journey.

When the world feels heavy, when we feel afraid, questioning the choices we've made and the path that we are faithfully walking, it can be so important to gather with others who 'get it', who make us feel known or safe or nourished or who just don't require of us any extra work in order to be recognized as equal. It's important that we seek out and protect spaces in our lives where we can have our cups filled. Ideally, the church can be one of these places where our identities need no defense, our experiences of systemic oppression are a shared concern, and our commitment to God are rooted in our commitments to each other. Whether we have access to this kind of place at church or in our families or a support group or an intentional gathering of friends, these spaces help keep us grounded. They are a necessary part of a holistic life.

Jesus calls us to these mountain top experiences. They are a sacred gift. And, Jesus calls us to live in the valleys as well. When we are committed to following Christ, we can't be true to our faith if we are not working to enliven the realities of God in the hard places. In relationships with family members who say racist things at the dinner table or in meetings where sexism silences the women in the room, or over lunch with a friend who has wronged us.

Our spiritual lives call us to a balance between places and relationships that are rich in unconditional love, acceptance and nourishment, and intentionally choosing to engage with messy and complicated realities for the sake of our collective flourishing. Sometimes that requires a change.

And if we really struggle to live out these changes (as apparently 92% of us who tried to make New Year's Resolutions do) as people of the resurrection, we know that Easter morning is coming. We can try for 40 days, knowing that Easter is coming.

So let yourself be changed. Let yourself be changed by the mystery of the Lenten season. Let yourself be changed by being intentional for 40 days and bearing witness to how that might transform you both on the outside and also from within. Let yourself be changed knowing that resurrection is coming – both in our faith and also in our lives. Let yourself be changed and may your Lenten season be full of God-sized changes and blessings.

And do not be afraid. Thanks be to God. Amen.