**Preaching Notes for Transfiguration Sunday, Year C (February 7, 2016)**

**By the Reverend Cedrick D. Bridgeforth, Ed. D.,
Guest Writer for Black History Month**

As we transition to the season of Lent and during the month of February as we celebrate Black History Month in the United Methodist Church, I am very excited and grateful to share with my readers the perspective and reflections of our guest writer for February, **the Reverend Cedrick D. Bridgeforth, Ed. D.** I hope you find Rev. Bridgeforth’s notes to be both inspiring and challenging as you prepare to preach a bold and prophetic word in your own congregation. – Dawn Chesser

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[**Luke 9:28-36**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=116#gospel_reading)

During this month when some among us will commemorate Black History Month, key figures, critical milestones, and notable heroes/heroines will be lauded in written essays, speech competitions, poem recitations, and various visual and digital art forms. There will also be a plethora of customs that will point congregations and communities toward a history marked by trials and triumphs of those who began life in this country as slaves and impoverished persons and who had to find a new way to make a life for themselves. There will be many tales of the thousands who died traversing the Middle Passage, wonderment of those who escaped servitude via The Underground Railroad and undeniable valor of men who fought for a country whose Constitution counted them as three-fifths human.

All of that will be juxtaposed against the biographies of Chief Justice Thurgood Marshall and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the feats of Jackie Robinson and the Tuskegee Airmen, and the artistry of Debbie Thomas and the Alvin Ailey Dancers. No one can point to the exact time or place where society became more accepting and more inclusive of the people who were once seen as less-than, but we know it happened and continues to happen all around us. The same could be said of what we know as The Transfiguration because we cannot point to where it happened, but we know what happened. Jesus was transfigured (a metamorphosis occurred) on a high mountain. Scholars debate over the exact location, but the text informs us what happened and that seems to be the point—he was changed right before Peter’s, James’s, and John’s eyes.

The way the text is constructed seems to point to the notion that the occurrence of the great light, presence of the prophets (Moses and Elijah), and the voice of God was not for the sake of Jesus, but more for the sake of the three disciples. They needed to hear from God. They needed to know God was orchestrating the movements of his son. They needed to know Jesus was not a mere mortal. They needed to know any resistance to Jesus was resistance to what God was doing. For Peter, in particular, the instruction God offered was to enlighten him to the fact that Jesus was not to be equated with Moses and Elijah in any way. All three of them bore the word of God for God’s people, but Jesus was the only one “begotten of God” (John 3:16). Without the verbal instruction from God to “listen to him” (verse 35), Peter, James and John could have simply been overwhelmed by what they saw and walked away with the vision of Jesus being equal to Moses and Elijah. They also might not have grasped the true divine nature of Jesus that shone all around him as God declared God’s pleasure in Jesus, just as he had done at Jesus’ baptism.

Just as the disciples could have been left to their own devices to figure out what the trip up the mountain really meant, the descendants of slaves and slave owners in the United States could have also been left to their own devices to figure out how to co-exist without one people lording over another. Their experiences were simultaneous and intertwined, but they were different. The slaves and slave owners experienced and saw the world very differently, and that difference has an impact on how descendants of slaves and descendants of slave owners see the world. Just as the text gives minimal clues to where and when the Transfiguration of Jesus took place, we cannot point to when and exactly where the changes began to take place in society. But we know there was a change and metamorphosis of hearts, laws, and the will of a people that continue toward transformation today.

Sometimes change and the message of change is instant and awe-inspiring, like the brightness of a light shining down from heaven in a way so vivid it reveals the presence of prophets of old and calls forth the very voice of God. At other times, change is spurred by a glimmer of hope in the eye of a slave boy who determines in his heart that he will not die a slave, and it is that sure will that brings about transformation within a society that cannot deafen the voice of liberty, love, and reason spoken from the depths of a soul of one dark in hue and called to proclaim the good news to the poor and release to captives.

What happens on the other side of the decision to change or the result of the deep change that takes place is transformation. The “what” of the transfiguration takes center stage because it is what brings about transformation of thoughts about who Jesus is and how the disciples are to entreat him. The transformation of thoughts, perspectives and heaven-labeled identity is what gives Jesus and his disciples the strength, direction, and support needed to continue toward Jerusalem.

The same can be said of those who celebrate and emulate the struggles of black people and other oppressed people of our society, for when a change takes place inside of them or within their community that leads them to higher heights, the whole world feels its effects and reaps the benefits. The experience of the disciples on the mountain brought about deep change for them and for the movement they were a part of and would eventually lead. They heard the voice of God, and they saw Jesus in a new light that could have blinded them. Yet that same light that enveloped Jesus spoke unto them about who Jesus was and how they were to govern themselves in relation to him. The disciples had to choose to remain in a place where the light had been or they could go forth and live in remembrance of the light, doing as Jesus commanded them.

There are several comparisons and contrasts between the disciples’ experience on the mountain and the presence and measured progress of black people in the United States. The disciples were tired and weary atop the mountain. Black people who were subjected to chattel slavery were tired and weary while tilling the land, building railroads, and being stripped from family and familiar customs. The disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ identity was limited until they heard the voice of God. Black people who struggled to worship the God of their oppressors were challenged to see The Christ as a savior they could trust. The disciples were challenged to remain silent about what they had encountered on the mountain. Black people found Jesus to be on their side and could not keep the message of hope to themselves.

The disciples were so overtaken by this encounter with God during the Transfiguration they were compelled to remain on the mountaintop because of the awesomeness of the moment. Black people encountered Jesus as liberator and could not remain in the same state of oppression; his words spoke of freedom and justice that was in direct contradiction to the lives to which they were being subjected. Black people struggled with permanence, even in their worship lives, because of the constant interpretation and integration that had to take place across language, culture, and eventually time.

When the distance between the voice of God and the ears of Black people lessened and was not experienced through slave masters’ interpretations or commentaries, a claim of Jesus as liberator became more real and possible. That acceptance of Jesus as one on the side of the oppressed instilled a will and determination that galvanized a people to stand up and speak out against injustices in laws and religious practices that instilled divisions between any and all created by God and in God’s image. God’s instruction to the disciples gave them what they needed to descend from the mountain with an assurance they were to follow Jesus and to do as he commanded. The light came to reveal a truth that humanity cannot deny.

[**Exodus 34:29-35**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=116#hebrew_reading)

Moses veiled his face when he was not in conversation with God. The choice presented by Moses is a curious one because it seems our modern interpretation of homage and humility depicts and suggests the opposite. Many religious traditions and sects insist a person be covered in some way when approaching holy spaces and places. Moses, like the disciples during Jesus’ transfiguration experience, descended with words from God that would shine light on how one’s life was to be ordered individually and communally. Moses put the veil over his face after he shared the word of the Lord, not during the recitation.

The use of veils and other manner of coverings have always fascinated me. My grandmother and all the older women at our rural, southern church wore hats to church each Sunday. Those hats adorned their heads as appendages they dare not ever been seen without on high holy days. On Communion Sundays and whenever there was a baptism, the hats would be replaced with a small white piece of cloth that resembled a doily or a handkerchief outlined with lace. The intricacies of the designs were of greater interest to me than the purpose for which they traded in their hats. The significance of the hats pointed more toward fashion, while the doilies were clearly ceremonial in nature. That was all I knew and cared to know for many years until I found myself serving for a summer in Botswana. While there I was once again forced to reckon with a woman’s head covering. Only this time it was not in a church building. No one was being baptized, and Communion was not being prepared or served.

We were on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, standing outside a small, makeshift tent where a woman, believed to be over 100 years old, lived. Although she did not speak or understand English, when we approached her tent and introduced ourselves, she received us with radical hospitality. She showed us around her compound and showed us the small animal she had trapped for food as she spoke to us through an interpreter. Before we departed, we offered to pray for her, so we bowed our heads in preparation for the prayer, but she walked away from us, motioning for us to wait. We stood patiently waiting for her to crawl inside her tent and back out again. When she emerged from the tent, she had a small piece of glowing white cloth atop her head. She sat down on the ground bowed her head and said, “Now, we may go in the face of God.” As far as we knew, this woman was not Christian and had never lived more than a mile from where we encountered her. Nevertheless, somewhere in her culture, her memory, her commitment to the holy, somehow she knew a covering was appropriate before going into the face of God.

This woman’s practice and the ritual observed by women in my home church were counter to what we experience with Moses, for the text explains that he would remove the veil when in the presence of God (verses 34-35). What is notable here is the way God entreated Moses and the way in which the old woman reverenced the holiness of a particular moment. Moses fully availed himself to the presence and voice of God by removing his veil and marking the communion of the human with the divine by stripping away all that might even appear to be a barrier between the two. For the old woman and for the women from my childhood, the head coverings were experienced as reverence and a clear sign of humility in the face of God. Where Moses’ face shone like the sun, the bright whiteness of the doilies gave way to a similar effect. What we learn here is that the covering of one’s face or head does not hide light; it reflects it and magnifies its strength all the more.

[**II Corinthians 3:12-4:2**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=116#epistle_reading)

We are challenged to place our all before God—our hearts, our lives, our motivations, our intent, our hurts, our sins, and our need for a pure heart before God. Regardless of what we were taught as children or what our society deems right, the question for us, as proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ is “Am I proclaiming what is right or what is righteous?” The message that points individuals, congregations and communities toward righteousness will instill a hope that will sustain movements and ideals and bring about transformation in the world. The challenge first comes to the woman or man in the mirror and is then carried to the masses. The proclaimer’s heart must be free of veiled envy and strife and ready to experience freedom, and each must know it is the Lord who does this transformative work. It is the Lord who delivers mercy and justice, yet it comes not that we may glory, but so God may be glorified in Christ Jesus.

Photo by the Rev. Maidstone Mulenga, for United Methodist News Service