



“BE TRANSFORMED”
SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 34: 29-35; LUKE 9: 28-36
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
March 3, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Exodus 34:29-35

34:29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

34:30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

34:31 But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

34:32 Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

34:33 When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face;

34:34 but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded,

34:35 the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Luke 9:28-36

9:28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

9:29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

9:30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.

9:31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

9:32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

9:33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- not knowing what he said.

9:34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

9:35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

9:36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Osama was 11 years old when his family moved to Jericho, a Palestinian Territory in the West Bank. Before that he had never met a Jewish person or an Israeli.¹

His first encounter was on his way to elementary school when Israeli soldiers blocked his path, emptied his backpack onto the street, and spoke to him in a language he didn't understand.

One night Israeli soldiers pounded on the door of his house while his family slept. He saw the shadow of a soldier standing in his hallway with a gun and saw his father run toward him to protect his family. The soldiers took his father away while Osama and his mother and sister huddled together and cried. When his father returned the next morning he was beaten and bruised, and would not speak of what happened.

That is when Osama became defined by rage.

He was arrested for the first time at age 14 for lifting a Palestinian flag. He became more and more committed to violence as the answer, and decided to fight in the Palestinian uprising, the Second Intifada.

Chen,² from Tel Aviv, grew up hearing stories of how his grandfather, a Zionist, left Poland to come to Palestine before World War II. "Zionism saved my family," Chen said. His grandfather was the only person in his family not to be killed in the Nazi death camps in Poland.

Chen was four years old when his family was attacked on Yom Kippur. He grew up watching his father fight for the state of Israel. He remembers his father coming back from fighting in the Yom Kippur war in the 1970s with deep psychological wounds.

Chen was shaped by his father's trauma, and wanted to fight for Israel. He was drafted into the First Intifada in 1987 and fought in the Second as well.

Jesus's transfiguration is rarely encountered as a text about morality. It is a normally cast as a text about Jesus' divinity. It is a Holy moment when Jesus' true identity is revealed in the conflation of past, present, and future.

We can be dazzled by it. But its message is a bit more challenging than a momentary spectacle. Don't be blind to the invitation here for anyone who seeks to follow Jesus. Transfiguration is about transformation and that is the kind of change Jesus invites in us as well.

Like Peter, James, and John, we are called into a mysterious, cloudy place where we can't see all the steps ahead of us, and we're not exactly sure what is happening to us. We are following a savior who tells us everything will change. And he shows us how much is at stake.

Being a Jesus follower means being open to the possibility of transformation no matter how far along on your journey you are, no matter how deep your wound is, no matter how hopeless things feel.

Transformation is not just a new attitude or a new perspective. Transformation is a change in form, a material, cellular, radical change that defies our expectations, that doesn't just change **us**, but changes the world.

Osama and Chen were deeply formed by hate. And they should have been—they came of age in war zones. Their homes, their relationships, their schools were formed in trauma, formed in violence.

The normal course of events in such conditions led them to be enemies.

And both could have easily ended their days on earth with a rifle in their hands, fighting for their families, fighting for their homeland.

But something stirred within both of these men—that led them to step into an unknown space of encounter with those they had learned to hate.

Lest you think this is a fairy tale of friendships forming across the lines of combat, this story is much more radical, and much more raw than that.

After so much bloodshed, in 2006 some people quietly arranged a meeting for some Israeli and Palestinian combatants to meet and try to listen to each other's stories. This meeting transformed the lives of Chen and Osama and many others.

"We found that we actually have something in common," one Israeli soldier said, "that willingness to kill people you don't know."³

In that raw place of realization about their shared culpability, the non-violent resistance movement known as Combatants for Peace was born—not in denying the horrible things we human beings are all capable of, but in telling the truth about ourselves and making a choice to try something new.

Osama and Chen now help lead house meetings, global conversations, and peace demonstrations along with other former combatants who have made a choice to put their lives on the line for a non-violent solution to building peace in Israel Palestine.

Lives transformed by the mystery of a moment in time.

All transformations are not to the good. People can be radicalized for hate. People can close ranks out of fear and self-preservation. People's hearts can harden. People of faith can do horrible things in the name of scripture, in the name of Jesus, in the name of God.

The United Methodist Church made a decision this past week to re-affirm the language in their Book of Discipline barring the ordination of LGBTQIA people and to prohibit any UMC clergy from performing marriages for LGBTQIA couples.

They called this the "traditional plan" in their voting process and cite scripture's teaching on homosexuality as the impetus for this choice. It was a close vote. Hearts are broken all over this country, indeed all over the world.

I grieve for our siblings in Christ who are being told their denomination will not honor their call to ministry or their love for another child of God.

And I remember not so long ago when we Presbyterians made similar soul-killing decisions for our own denomination. And the truth is we finally became the inclusive denomination we are today because many of the Presbyterians who are against the full inclusion of LGBTQIA people in the life of our denomination left the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Our denomination has been transformed, and it was not a fairy tale of unity. It is a story of transformation through the courage to follow Jesus into the unknown—our denomination lost members, we lost money, we lost congregations, but we found our integrity. And when it comes down to it, my friends, that is what transformation that is Spirit-led is all about, integrity.

Integrity is about telling the truth about ourselves. And the truth is, in the quest for justice we all have blind spots, but at the same time, all perspectives are not equal, all solutions to problems are not morally justifiable.

In the journey toward Jesus-led inclusion in the Body of Christ, homophobia, hatred of people because of how they were made and who they love, twisting scripture to justify annihilating the souls of a whole group of people because of their gender and sexual identity are not perspectives that we should affirm.

Being transformed means sometimes we risk ourselves, sometimes we lose friends, sometimes we lose money, sometimes we say goodbye to a way of life that was comfortable.

Integrity is a radical concept—it means your values, your actions, your words, your inclinations line up with your core identity, with what you truly believe is good and right.

And for transformation to have integrity **and** be Spirit-led, it must help heal the world's deepest collective wounds—the wounds of hatred, the wounds of abuses of power, the wounds of betrayal.

The church's homophobic, patriarchal, racist history does not condemn us all to a homophobic, patriarchal, and racist future.

And transformation is never over in the life of us Jesus followers.

God invites us into these radical healing opportunities over and over again.

I am grateful for the commitment our denomination has made to the full participation of LGBTQIA people and how we are living that out here at Grace Covenant. I know we did not get here without pain that some have had to bear more than others.

I pray we learned from that journey that transformation is not comfortable and it is not naïve. It is hard work and it involves us being honest with each other about the harm human beings are capable of inflicting on one another.

Our current commitment to cultivating racial equity and sanctuary at Grace Covenant call us to remember those past lessons about transformation. You cannot come to the work of dismantling white supremacy in the world, without the courage to look at the way you carry white supremacy within yourself.

It has been easy for white progressives to distance ourselves from the ugliness of racism. We can point to others who do overtly racist things like Mark Meadows bringing out a black employee of Donald Trump's to the floor of Congress to prove the President is not a racist.

We can condemn that behavior and breathe a sigh of relief that we are better than that. But distancing ourselves from overt racism, doesn't mean our behavior, our perspectives, our biases, and our formation aren't highly racialized.

In fact, white people who have been formed in largely white communities are some of the most deeply racialized people in America. We have lived in such a bubble that we actually think we don't have race, we can actually think we are not racist; we can actually think we are innocent in the impacts of racism. And all these things can make us the most prone to denying our brokenness, to denying our deep need for healing.

In Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* she calls on people just like most of us—progressive white people who don't think we are racist, to build up our “racial stamina.”⁴ She calls on us to be willing to look at our group identity as white people. Doing anything less, she argues, protects white supremacy in more destructive ways than overt racism does.

I have just finished her book, and I can't remember a book that I've read on race that taught me more about myself, and my own racialized identity, than this one. Indeed I can already feel it changing me.

I challenge you to read this book,⁵ and to go deeper into the work we are doing to dismantle white supremacy in ourselves and in our culture. Let us together practice again the moral courage it takes to truly change the way we take up space in the world, to truly seek deep healing in our self-understanding, in our most intimate relationships, in the communities we call home.

As Jesus followers, these Holy moments of truth come along in God's mysterious time—and here we are, with a shimmering, golden opportunity to grow in a way that can change the world.

Like Osama and Chen and those who laid down their weapons and chose a different way to be in the world, we, too, can lay down our defenses and be transformed.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Osama Elewat of Combatants for Peace was supposed to speak on Thursday, 2/28/19 at Temple Beth Israel in Asheville, NC but was detained by U.S. Homeland Security in the airport in New York and sent back to Jerusalem because U.S. officials told him his message is not “supported by the U.S. government.” You can read more about him at <https://cfpeace.org/personal-stories/osama-elewat/> and see him in the documentary film, “Disturbing the Peace.”

² To learn more about Chen Alon you can go to the Combatants for Peace website: <https://cfpeace.org/personal-stories/chen-alon-2/> He is also featured in the “Disturbing the Peace” documentary.

³ “Disturbing the Peace” documentary

⁴ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 14.

⁵ If you do choose to read the book, check out Robin DiAngelo’s website for some great resources and a reader’s guide. <https://robindiangelo.com/resources-2/>