

Holy Metamorphosis

Óscar Romero has been on my mind. If you're unfamiliar with Romero—first of all please go read about him because a brief aside in this sermon could never do justice to his incredible life. But he was appointed the Archbishop of El Salvador in the final years before civil war ravaged the country. The child of wealthy parents, he was chosen to lead the church by the oligarchs who **ruled** El Salvador, in large part because they believed that he would wield his ecclesial power to support their continued exploitation of the El Salvadorian campesinos who worked their land. After Romero became Archbishop, however, he experienced a dramatic metamorphosis when the dictatorship murdered both a close friend of his, Father Rutillo Grande, and several Catholic nuns—all of whom had been organizing poor folks in the countryside to speak out against the government.

After their deaths, Óscar became almost a wholly different man. I had the opportunity while I was in seminary to travel across El Salvador and speak with people who worked beside him, and again and again I heard testimony of how he seemed to be seized by the Holy Spirit, shaken from his previous complicity, moved to cry out against the oppression of God's people. Even his voice and the way he walked changed, they said, as if he had been transformed into the likeness of the One he was called to follow. He began to speak out vociferously against the government's violence. He took to the radio, offering stirring weekly sermons that roused the spirit of the El Salvadorian people, despite repeated warnings and orders from those in power to stay silent. Three years after this stunning change, he was presiding over Mass when gunmen walked through the door of a little white chapel and shot him through the heart.

So why am I talking about Óscar Romero this morning? Why should I disturb the peace of this tranquil March Sunday in our seaside town to speak of dictatorships and assassinations? And what does any of this have to do with Jesus' transfiguration, which we heard about in today's gospel reading? I'll confess that it's, in part, because I need some help interpreting what exactly happened on that mountaintop. Even the disciples

themselves seem confused: Peter and John are asleep, then they're awake. Peter offers to set up three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah while, and I quote, "not realizing what he was saying." All of a sudden, they are taken up into a cloud, terrified, surrounded by the voice of God who proclaims that Jesus is God's messiah. Then, they find themselves alone beside Jesus, and they keep their silence, telling no one about what they have seen, perhaps because they themselves do not fully understand what has happened. If the ones who stood with Jesus on that mountaintop find themselves shaken and perplexed by their experience, what hope do we have to interpret the holy mystery in these words?

And so, rather than simply sitting in reverent confusion at the foot of the mountain, my mind is drawn to a transfiguration I can touch—to streets I have walked, priests I spoke with, to that little white chapel where I prayed, where Romero's own bloodstained vestments are still preserved as a holy relic. Because here is the truth, if you go to El Salvador, you will see that the people there do not just consider Romero to be someone who faithfully followed Jesus. He is treated as someone who, in powerful and mysterious ways, became Jesus in their midst. Dramatic murals of Romero grace countless walls, showing him seated at God's right hand. His life is interpolated into stations of the cross, blending his own ministry and crucifixion with Jesus'. In life and in death, he is taken into that cloud beside Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—sanctified by his determination to live out the gospel call to defy violence, even to the point where it killed him.

Pay attention to who Jesus speaks with in that cloud! He is joined in the presence of God by Moses, who liberated God's people from bondage, and by Elijah, who prophesied against the heresy of Israel's King Ahab, who refused to worship God and instead built a temple to Baal. The messiah, it seems, comes to free God's people from the external forces who would restrict our freedom, but also to shatter our own complicity to any unjust ruler. If we are to follow Jesus and be similarly transfigured, this is not a passive change, it is an active confrontation with any place where evil holds power. In case this message was in doubt, look to the first thing Jesus does when he descends from the mountaintop: He encounters a demon possessing a child, one that "mauls him," and he casts that unclean spirit from the boy, liberating him for abundant life. Many of us are uncomfortable with talk about

demonic possession—we explain it away: “oh the boy had epilepsy, that’s why he foamed at the mouth,” or “that was something ancient folks believed in, before we had science to explain what is happening.” But, as uncomfortable as it might be, this morning I’m going to insist that we take accounts of demonic possession seriously, that we treat them as Jesus and the ancient audience would treat them: as a direct conflict with how evil manifests in our collective life. Again, this is the very first act of the transfigured Christ: He encounters the source of potent suffering and rebukes it in God’s name.

We must take unclean spirits seriously because boy do we have some in our midst. When rulers gut international aid, abandoning food distribution, AIDS interventions, and malaria programs that have saved millions of lives, that’s an unclean spirit. When the powerful use their authority to enrich themselves and their friends, twisting the justice system to escape prosecution, that’s an unclean spirit. When government experts and professionals are replaced with cronies whose only credentials are unwavering loyalty, that’s an unclean spirit. When words like “diversity, equity and inclusion” are treated as an enemy we must purge, when queer and trans people are told we don’t exist, that is an unclean spirit. When migrant families who have been our neighbors for decades are rounded up and deported, that is the work of evil in our midst. I’m not going to belabor any of this, because our days and weeks do enough of that already, but it’s important as Christians to understand these days not just as a political crisis but as a spiritual referendum on who we will become as the people of God. Will we follow Ahab as the King orders worship to an unholy order? Or will we follow Elijah and expose the moral bankruptcy of any movement who proclaims to follow Christ but violates the life and ministry of Jesus? Will we obey Pharaoh out of deference to the rule of law, or will we be like Moses and break laws as we conspire for liberation?

Because the good news at the heart of our text is that, if we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, brought into communion with the living God, we will be revealed as our truest selves. That’s the other piece that’s clear from Luke’s gospel: It is the experience of transfiguration that reveals Jesus to the world. Coming face to face with God, Jesus’ radiance is shown to all around him, for the first time the disciples understand the

fullness of the one with whom they've traveled. That's not just something that's real for Jesus on a mountaintop two thousand years ago, it's how God moves in our own communities. We live in an age of mendacity, inundated by lies about how we should regard one another. Again and again, powerful voices spin tales about violent immigrants, criminal Black folks, deviant queer people, lazy poor folks—all these tropes and the others that live in your head are intentionally manufactured because they make us suspicious of one another. Fascists and tyrants need our fear, it is the renewable resource that fuels authoritarian rule.

If we let the radiant love of God be the lens through which we see one another, however, these lies fall away. Love reveals the truth of our common purpose: our yearning and striving, our falling short and picking ourselves back up, our capacity for both harm and forgiveness, our shared desire to be known, to live in community, care for the Earth, and build a meaningful life. This small-t transfiguration may not reveal divinity like it does for Jesus, but it does the next best thing: It reveals humanity. And it is our very humanness that renders us fit to follow Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

Once we begin to see each other as God sees us: fearfully and wonderfully made, we can build pockets of transformation, spaces shaped and held by that all-enveloping love. In these disturbing and frightening days, that is a radical act. On Friday, I danced with reckless abandon at OUTMaine's annual Rainbow Gala. Does that erase the violence and discrimination our government is committing against queer people? No. But it shows that we belong to one another, that we will not simply cede our rights and safety without a fight. Again and again, this is a story we can live. Whether it's our community food pantry that makes sure no one in our area goes hungry, Homeworthy, who finds affordable housing for folks in Knox county, people doing ecological justice work, folks building ethnic affinity spaces, or Niweskok the new Wabanaki community farm and heritage center that's opening this month in Swanville, we can let transfiguration radiate outward, knitting us to our neighbors with love that won't be torn apart.

There's a prayer I often turn to in moments like this. Though it was written by a different Catholic Bishop, it's often misattributed to Óscar Romero because of how frequently it's said in El Salvador. Here's the translation:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

If we have the courage to live transfigured lives, we may not see a full world rendered holy in the likeness to God, but I swear to you we will see and experience parts of it. And we sow seeds that hold legacies beyond our wildest longings.

I happened to be worshipping in Óscar Romero's tomb on the day the Vatican announced he was beatified. When the news was shared, the air in the catacombs crackled electric. As mass let out, we walked into the streets and I watched the crowds rejoice, celebrating someone whose steadfast love transfigured him into the very likeness of God, bringing deliverance to people who needed it. I may not understand all the mysteries of what transpired on that mountaintop, but I believe in transfiguration. I believe we are changed when we surrender ourselves to God, and I believe that love can cast out the unclean spirits that plague God's people. That's enough good news to sustain a life.