

INCUMBENT'S CHARGE TO VESTRY

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Transfiguration Sunday - February 27, 2022

Scriptures: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a

May our gathering today honour the Creator: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is known as Transfiguration Sunday but it is more properly the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It is the culmination of a season of epiphanies – realizations about who Jesus is – of the bright shimmering lights of synapses go off in our brains as we put it all together and say: Now therefore - Here is what that means about who we are.

The process of saying “Now Therefore” is more complex and more demanding than it might appear. It is more complex because we don’t deal in Jesus soundbytes and more demanding because of the times in which we live. I would like to begin with an analogy, something that helps me make sense of this “Now therefore” on the Sunday of our Annual Vestry Meeting.

Yoga has been of my life for about 10 years. My favourite yoga is a class that is always the same series of poses. I would compare it to a liturgy where you always know what is next: readings, sermon, creed, prayers... This yoga was not so much a meditation as series that required my focus to the extent that it pushed all other thoughts out of my mind. The poses were so involved and hard that if you didn’t pay attention, you might fall over.

My favourite pose is called Dandayamana Dhanurasana, commonly known as Standing Bow Pulling Pose. If you imagine one of your legs up in the air in a vertical version of the splits, it will cause you to arch your back as the bow, and then an outstretched arm in front would be the arrow. I could see that in my mind and it became the high point of the class for me. If I had a good standing bow, it was a good class. If I didn’t do it well... this set up a problem. Was the whole class wasted? Was it an indicator of areas of my life that were out of whack?



My standing bow pulling pose became a goal. I even asked the instructors to take pictures so I could see what my version looked like. Then there was the time when I could see the woman in front of me in the mirror and her pose was perfect. I fell over.

I am telling you this by way of asking what is the main event and what is the distraction? That's an important question for an annual vestry meeting. To use other figures of speech: Do we risk losing the plot because we are bogged up in too many details? Do we leave projects unfinished because of too many interruptions? From my yoga illustration, it's about focus.

There are two interruptions in this account of Jesus transfigured by dazzling light. Here's the sequence:

Jesus tells the disciples that he will suffer and be rejected, then be killed, and be raised from the dead on the third day - and they protest! The next thing that happens is they go up the mountain. Jesus is filled with blinding light. The disciples are gob-smacked - and who wouldn't be?

Actually, it's well-known that *everyone* would be. The Israelites were when Moses came down the mountain with the 10 commandments. They were so afraid that Moses had to cover his face. And not just that time, I bet Moses was glowing after he saw the burning bush (even if nobody else was there).

The Apostle Paul directly references this by comparing Jesus to Moses: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image..." We are supposed to shine. Paul is not one to reference many of the details of Jesus life, so why this story? Maybe because Paul had his own blinding light experience of seeing Jesus – Paul's conversion is also a story of a transfigured Jesus.

Back to the story: The first interruption is when the disciples want to build dwellings for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. This has been widely interpreted, caricatured even, that they wanted to linger in glory moments because people like to make these last, and maybe because Jesus' prediction about Jerusalem disturbed them.

I want to offer another interpretation to push back at Paul's negative assessment about how his fellow Jews hear the scriptures but are constrained in their understanding. The Jewish festival of Sukkot includes the construction of temporary outdoor dwellings. These are rich in meanings, and one of these is the reminder that all dwellings are temporary in this wilderness experience of life – in which we always rely on the goodness of the Holy One.

Back to the story: The next interruption happens after disciples come down the mountain with Jesus. This time it's a father whose son is possessed by a demon. Jesus heals him, and then to keep the disciples from losing the plot he tells them a second time that he is on the way to Jerusalem to face his death. This time they don't protest at all.

There are two interruptions, but what is the main event? Is it the bright light? Jesus insists on repeating his prediction about his death so perhaps his death is the main event? Some New Testament scholars have gone with this and taken it even further. That the Transfiguration is a kind of Resurrection account moved up in the story because to emphasize Jesus' death as the main event. That reminds me of some versions of Christianity where the focus is almost exclusively on Jesus dying for our sins so we can go to heaven. By that telling, almost everything in Luke's gospel is an interruption right until chapter 22 starts with the plot to kill Jesus.

Yoga is my daily life example of asking myself, what's the main event? The one posture. Comparing to others? Personal fitness? The whole day that surrounds the yoga class, with its lovely endorphins? Or is it the focus that forces me to let go of all my other thoughts and worries for 90 minutes – and when I return to them, they feel different because of the space for compassion.

I want to apply that now to Jesus. What's the main event?

We have left behind the birth cycle of how Jesus come among us as the light of the world. This Sunday is the conclusion of that cycle. It's a feel-good day. Good music. The church is open again for in-person worship. Why wouldn't we want to linger and bask in that light? Maybe Jesus words to the disciples about not building booths is fitting advice for us. We will enter the cycle of death and resurrection this Wednesday.

But is Jesus' death the main event? I go back and forth again and again on this. There are days when I think it's not the most important thing. Instead, the gospel is all about the interruptions, and if we refuse those, we will have missed the main event. But when I am close to death, that of someone else or even contemplating my own, I have this feeling Jesus is onto something

Here's how I phrase that to myself today. In a time of violence when those who lost had nothing but suffering, Jesus stood in the breach. He even handed himself over to suffering knowing that I might not be able to handle what suffering might be ahead of me. Many people will not be able to stand in the face of violence. What Jesus did makes up for my lack and our lack – while at the same time, inspiring us to be brave about what lies ahead.

To reference current events, it seems the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is being rather Jesus-like in his readiness to stand at the breach of violence.

What about us, St John's? When it comes to this church, what is the main event?

Recent events remind me of the jumble of my mind before a yoga class. I need those 90 minutes to grip my attention so much that I let go of all my preoccupations and worries. More and more, I count on 90 minutes of liturgy to land me on the other side of my worries with greater calm and clarity.

There's a lot going on right now. The protester convoy is barely over. Already the news cycle has moved on to Ukraine. The news has forgotten the Ottawa protesters and maybe not a moment too soon. The spotlight of media attention made for a temporary convergence of many quite different priorities. But where are we in this? Protesters, Ukraine - and a first Sunday back in church in the ebb and flow of pandemic tides. Is there a main event for us? Do we risk getting distracted by too many things? Are we flying off in all directions in our many priorities and distractions?

What is the goal? Is it survival? Is it to be the yeast in the dough for Centretown – changing hearts and engaging minds in the ways of justice and non-violence which are the ways of our Saviour Jesus Christ?

Week by week we take a 90-minute time-out to call on the name of the Lord. And the Lord answers by making us into a people who love and act. We act one by one. We also act as a group. We are the yeast in the dough.

From a one-by-one perspective, our actions are many and diverse. We are in Centretown – and the rest of Ottawa too. We are in our workplaces. We are in community organizations. We are in our own

immediate neighbourhoods. Our yeast is energy, interest, ideas, presence. What does yeast need? It needs some warm water and sugar – some worship and music maybe? – but then it has to go be in the dough. There's no limit on what each of us can do as yeast in the dough. That is the ministry that we each bring into all our worlds.

But there is a limit on what we can do collectively. That's why we are having an annual meeting today. Yes, it feels like it's a formula. It's required. It's normal. But it's also because so much of the magic of yeast happens in our together time. We want to choose well together.

I did not succeed at solo yoga in front of the TV, though I tried. Some of you probably feel the same way about joining St John's for worship on Zoom or watching a worship video on YouTube. We need the energy of the group. Sunday worship gives us that. In addition, shared learning experiences help us to participate more fully in Sunday worship as well as in our shared projects.

Today, we will meet. We will talk about the past year. We will thank people. We will elect people to roles. We will plan. We will represent our plans in numbers. It sounds formulaic, but every number represents a part of what we are about.

What is the main event in how St John's represents Jesus? I think it's presence. Jesus answered the question about dwellings. He treated a suffering child as worthy of attention, and not as a distraction. Jesus was able to focus on both the immediate and where it was all headed. He was present.

That's actually what we need at St John's. Both the immediate and where we are headed. The main event that helps us to focus, that keeps us open as the events change and change and change?

We call on the name of the Lord. And the Lord answers and forms us in the pattern of Jesus. We are yeast for the loaf, we are blessings for the suffering, we are standing in the breach between compassion and violence.

May we be formed into the people God needs in this hour. May our meeting today equip us to be St John's as yeast in the dough and light in the community. Amen.