
Perspectives on Lent
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 2 and Matthew 17:1-9

Whenever I hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, I always wonder - what actually happened on that mountain. What would we have seen if we had been there ourselves? One interpretation is that Jesus looked different to the disciples because Jesus changed. The story is certainly written that way. Matthew says, “And Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, and Jesus’s face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white”. The story as written certainly suggests that Jesus changed, or at least his appearance changed.

But perhaps Jesus looked different to the disciples because the disciples were themselves changed. Perhaps it was the disciples’ ability to see that changed. Did Jesus’s body physically change, or was it that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining through the man that they thought they already knew well? Who was changed that day? Jesus? Or the disciples?

And if the disciple’s vision changed on that day, did their new ability to see come down from the mountain with them when they finally descended? When they left the mountain to return to everyday life, did the disciples take their new capacity to see into the valleys of their world? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in Jesus when they were not on the mountain? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in other people? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in each other.

And what would be the bigger miracle? Jesus’s body physically changing? Or the disciples - who were ordinary people like us - living into new perspectives on seeing the face of God right here and right now. I believe that embracing a new perspective can be more miraculous - more life changing - than any physical transformation. Perspectives are important.

Consider the bulletin cover. I found that image because I was looking online for a sketch of an animal. But now that I see it on the bulletin, in black-and-white, I’m sort of

disappointed. It looked better in colour. And moreover, I realize that I don't particularly like frogs. I may as well throw this away I guess.

[throw the frog on the ground and pick up a horse]

Well look at that. Now I have a picture of a horse. Well that's better. I certainly like horses more than I like frogs. So what is the picture? Is it a frog or a horse? I suppose it depends on my perspective. By the way, when I was younger I used to really hate it when ministers used lame illustrations like this. After all, it's really just an optical illusion, not really a change in perspective and certainly not a change in attitude. And besides, the frog/horse example doesn't apply in real life unless you want to walk around with your head tilted over all the time. So - beyond optical illusions - do our perspectives actually matter?

Consider this. You all know about the chicken who crossed the road. But do you know about the chicken who didn't cross the road? Well, there was once a chicken on the side of a road. And it looked over and saw another chicken on the other side of the road. Traffic was heavy so the first chicken asked the second chicken - "how do I get to the other side of the road". And the second chicken answered, "Don't do anything. You are already on the other side of the road". OK - But beyond optical illusions and word-games, do our perspectives really matter?

Consider these 2 scenes from a movie. In one scene, a person is stranded on a desert island. They lack food and water. But they see a boat in the distance, coming towards them, and they think they will be saved. In the other scene, we see a person in a small boat. The boat is sinking, and they lack food and water. But they see an island in the distance, which they are sailing towards, and the sailor thinks they will be saved. But both scenes are in fact the same scene. The survivor on the island and the sailor both think that the other person will save them. But they are both going to die. OK - But beyond optical illusions, word-games and expectations, do our perspectives really matter?

Consider these 2 scenes from a movie. In one scene, a person is telling a friend about what happened to him the previous evening. He says, "I had a wonderful evening.

My wife and I went out for a romantic dinner. After dinner, we walked for over an hour. When we got home we lit candles all over the house. It was perfect”. In the other scene, a person is telling a friend about what happened to her the previous evening. She says, “I had a terrible evening. They cut off our electricity so we couldn’t make dinner and had to eat out. The meal was more expensive than we expected so we couldn’t afford a cab and had to walk home. When we got home it was dark and we had to put candles everywhere. It was a disaster” The man and the woman are describing the same evening, but in very different ways. OK but beyond optical illusions, word-games, expectations, and our attitudes, do our perspectives really matter?

[slide of deer crossing road]

Just one more. What is this? Yes, I thought someone might say it’s a deer crossing a road. But don’t you think it’s also a road crossing a forest? Deer were probably crossing that particular location long before there was a road there.

Consider our own perspectives on God. In Psalm 2 we are presented with a particular image of God. “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve God with fear, with trembling kiss God’s feet, or God will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for God’s wrath is quickly kindled.” The Psalm presents us with an image of a god who seems more like a petulant child. A god who seriously needs to be sent to an anger management workshop. A god who is cruel and selfish. A god who commands respect out of fear, not out of love. A god from the imagination of a tribal community from a context we can only guess at.

In contrast to that image of a God of fear, Jesus says, “do not be afraid”. Although there are a few exceptions to this, Jesus generally speaks of a God of love, not a god of fear. Jesus speaks of a God of relationship, not a god of power. Jesus speaks of a God of connection, not a god of self-righteousness. Well, I am willing to argue that our perspectives on God do matter. I will argue that all of perspectives matter actually.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in lent. So this week we celebrate a deeply rooted tradition called “Pancake Supper”. I hope you can all come and enjoy that. But I hope

more than that. I hope that we all engage in the full package, which takes us from Pancake Tuesday through all of lent.

Lent is the 40 day time of preparation for Easter. Well, it's actually 46 days, but according to the church, the 6 Sundays in lent do not count as part of lent and so according to Church Math, lent is 40 days long. I don't know if you are familiar with the idea of "Church Math". Church Math is like regular Math, except that Church Math is more mysterious. It's even more mysterious than New Math, but that's another sermon.

Traditionally, lent was a time of penitence and self-denial. During the Middle Ages, people abstained from certain foods during lent, usually meats, fats, eggs, and milk. The official start of lent is Ash Wednesday. So what do you think people did with their meat, fats, eggs, and milk before Ash Wednesday rolled around? They ate them of course! Shrove Tuesday became a party to consume all the food stuffs you were not going to eat during lent. "Mardi Gras" - which is French for "Fat Tuesday" symbolizes this. Incidentally, what we call Shrove Tuesday at one time was a 3-day party that started on Sunday and lasted for 3 days. In our own tradition, that has all been compressed down into one meal of pancakes and sausages - so at least we do get the meats, fats, eggs, and milk. So come and enjoy Pancake Supper on Tuesday.

But come back the next day for our Ash Wednesday service too. Because Ash Wednesday is our kick-off to lent, where we are all encouraged to abstain from something. Actually, since this is my first lent with you, I should probably ask - is there a tradition here of giving up something for lent?

[ask: what do people give up for lent?]

Even though I brought up the subject myself, believe it or not I'm not a big fan of giving up physical things for lent. But it's because I think we can perhaps do better. How about this. How about if during Lent we put down a burden that we are carrying that is not helping us live our lives. To turn a frog into a horse, I had to throw the frog away first. If we want a new perspective on life, sometimes we have to throw away some baggage first.

This lent, I invite each of us to throw away some personal baggage for lent. Don't

just give up chocolate. Give up something that will make a real difference to you. Give up something that is holding you down, holding you back, give up something that prevents you from living the life that you want. For example, how about giving up resentment for lent. How about giving up anger. How about giving up being judgemental? All of us carry baggage that we don't need that is separating us from living into the Kingdom of God right now. Give it up for lent. Who knows, you might even give it up forever!

If you are not sure what to give up, or not sure how to give it up, there are many wonderful people in this congregation who can help you. Or give me a call. I'd be more than happy to chat with you about what's going on in your life.

I wanted to talk today about perspectives and lent. You might think I'm about a week ahead of schedule. But I thought the theme fit today because after this service we are having our Annual Congregational Meeting. Because congregational meetings are also a good time to consider what it is that we need to put down in order to move forward. Are there things that we - as a congregation - should give up for lent? Are there any resentments or judgements or other baggage we need to give up as a congregation? Since I've only been here 23 days, I won't offer to answer that question. But I do believe that between us, we do know what it is that we should give up for lent. And I hope to catch a sense of that during our meeting.

Lent is a great opportunity to live into a new perspective. The disciples learned how to see the face of God on the mountain, and then took that perspective with them into everyday life. We are all invited to do the same thing. We can do that as individuals and we can do that as a congregation. We can learn to see the face of God in our community. We can learn to see the face of God in each other. We can learn to see the face of God in ourselves. I encourage everyone to stay for the annual meeting - and lunch of course. Come and add your voice to the discussion what new perspective we need to more clearly see - and be - God in our midst.

Amen.