

**Mardi Gras Sunday/Feast of the Transfiguration**  
**“On the Way to Easter” by Luke Williams**  
**February 14, 2010**

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

I'm glad so many of you came dressed festively and with beads and masks. This is actually my first Mardi Gras Sunday. You know how stodgy Presbyterians can be; we always celebrate Transfiguration. I'm sure you've notice there's a lot going on today. We are celebrating both Mardi Gras, and commemorating the Transfiguration (which is what the readings today are about). And it also happens to be Valentines Day. We won't touch on Valentines day during the service, but we do have a Valentines inspired coffee hour. And today is the Lunar New Year.

What is Mardi Gras, and why are we celebrating it? When we hear Mardi Gras, I imagine most of us think about a big, crazy, drunken party in New Orleans. A friend of mine was in New Orleans yesterday for the festivities, and—via Facebook posts—I can vouch that their Mardi Gras celebration is well underway...and that beads abound! But Mardi Gras does have religious origins. In fact, most Christian cultures outside the United States have a celebration before Lent begins. These pre-lenten practices range everywhere from elaborate carnivals to pancake races. Mardi Gras comes from the French words “fat tuesday”, because it was the day that the fat and milk items restricted during Lent were used up. Some places call the day before Ash Wednesday Pancake Day, because it was common to make pancakes to use up the rest of the restricted ingredients. There are several English words to describe the day, including Shrove Tuesday, which comes from the archaic word “shrive” which means to confess sins and receive absolution. It's also called Carnival day, which comes from the Latin word “carnelevarium”, which means “flesh + put away”, and is the Latin word for shrovetide.

Many places that are predominantly Roman catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran have rich Shrove Tuesday customs. In Pennsylvania it's called Fastnacht Day, because of a pastry that is traditionally made on that day. Scott tells me that if you're in Pennsylvania a little before Lent, make sure to have one! They also have pastries on that day in many European countries, as a last time treat before Lent began. And in their place once lent got going, pretzels were developed as a Lenten food, because it didn't have milk or eggs. They're fashioned in that shape to mimic arms in prayer. It's also the time for carnivals. It's sorta like the last celebration of life before Lent begins.

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I imagine most of you are more familiar with Mardi Gras than Transfiguration, that other event we're celebrating, that we heard about it in the readings. What exactly was this transfiguration event? What was going on?

The transfiguration event showed to the disciples who Jesus was. There isn't any consensus among scholars about how to best label the event. Is it a tale originating from the Hellenistic tradition? Maybe it's a misplaced resurrection narrative. Is it an

epiphany? a theophany? Christophany? Revelation of the divine? Maybe scholars can't agree because the story itself has a lot of things going on, it is indeed a unique event.

The story uses Moses and Elijah to link Jesus to various events in the history of the Hebrew faith. Jesus's face was glowing, just like Moses's face was glowing when he came down Mount Saini. Jesus was surrounded by Elijah and Moses. Elijah is traditionally interpreted to be the greatest among the prophets, with Moses not far behind. But the disciples missed the point. Peter was ready to build tents that would have been used in the Sukkut, the festival of booths. I think Peter is my favorite disciple. I might be projecting my own personality, but I would guess is that Peter's probably a Meyers Briggs ENFP, which is what I am. I tend to speak without thinking and am easily distracted by shiny objects! I love Peter's enthusiasm and sometimes half-brained schemes. But it's in that excitement that makes him so fun that he missed the point, and I think we do sometimes too.

You see, the transfiguration helps explain who Jesus is and what he's going to do. Who is he? "My Son, the Chosen", the clouds boomed. "Listen to him". The event reveals Jesus as God's son, and the Greek word for "the chosen" actually means "to pick out of oneself" or "call out of oneself". Jesus had actually come as a part of Godself.

The transfiguration also pointed to where Jesus was going. The text said that "Moses and Elijah appeared in glory and were speaking of Jesus's departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." This appearance showed them what was going to take place in Jerusalem. It's a foreshadowing of the death, resurrection, and ascension, which all take place later in Luke's Gospel.

We celebrate this Transfiguration day the last Sunday before Lent starts, because it shines some light on upcoming Jerusalem events we're journeying towards: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Starting this Wednesday our minds are also going to be focused on this upcoming events in Jesus's life. His death, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We start on a forty day journey, and like Jesus, we set our faces towards Jerusalem.

The Transfiguration account helps to put Jesus in perspective for us on our journey, and to set the pace for the outcome in Jerusalem that bleak Friday, holy Saturday, and joyful Sunday. It reminds us why we enter the season of Lent at all: it's because we know the outcome at Easter, and want to prepare our hearts and minds to best receive the joyful news. I like to think of it as a journey. The early church was known as The Way, and it's a fitting metaphor for our faith, and this season we are starting. We embark on a Lenten journey. Lent is like the winter path on our journey towards Spring.

I know San Diegans will think I'm crazy for admitting this, but I really want to try living somewhere that has the four seasons. Partially it's because I do like snow. But mostly because I'm convinced that having a snowy winter without much life makes you appreciate the spring more. And since I've never tried it, I want to put myself through a real winter with snow, ice, and cold, so I can really know what it's like to experience Spring as a miracle of rebirth from nothing. I want to try it almost like a

spiritual experience. I want to see new life spring up around me from places that have been dead. That's the period that Lent gives us, that winter of preparation for the spring of Easter.

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We start our journey this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. We take time from our busy lives to remember our mortality, to remember our sins, and confess our shortcomings to God. We start out the journey remembering who we are and whose we are. No matter where we go on our Lenten or spiritual journey, we always remain under God's Care.

But Ash Wednesday is just the beginning; we have forty days. Forty days of wilderness. Forty days of winter. Forty days to really contemplate who we are, and whose we are. How can we get closer to God? How can we build relationships within our community? How can we make progress on our journey? This is the prep work time.

Traditionally there are three disciplines that help us remember who we are and who's we are. Fasting or abstaining, almsgiving, or helping the poor or marginalized, and religious practices, or prayer.

By abstaining from food or something else that may keep us distracted, we can focus our energy into doing one of the other activities. But fasting isn't necessarily for everyone. And I mean that seriously. Too many people give up some trivial item like sweets in hopes to get closer to God, and likely to lose some of that holiday weight. If you're going to fast, really be intentional about why you're doing it, otherwise, maybe you could try focusing on doing something rather than giving it up.

Such as Almsgiving, or helping the poor, marginalized or downtrodden. Almsgiving traditionally means giving money, but I would suggest really getting out and finding ways to help those who are in need. Stop and talk to a homeless person, or at least acknowledge their presence, affirm their humanity. It could be advocating for justice or trying to see others as God sees them by recognizing the holy in others. Connect to God by reaching out into God's world.

And finally there's religious practices. Take time to pray, read the bible, walk a labyrinth or maybe even exercise, such as yoga or an evening walk. Or maybe just driving without the radio during Lent and spend the time in prayer. Whatever centers you closer to God.

If you decide to take up a practice, I encourage you to find something that you think will bring you closer to God, something that will open you up to God's presence and to the presence of others. Don't just give up chocolate. I haven't quite decided but I'm thinking of running daily as a spiritual time. Running also centers me, and clears distractions, so that I can focus my energy in better directions.

And always keep in mind what we're preparing for. Yes, Easter, I know. But not just because of the lilies and colorful eggs, and pretty dresses. No, because we're celebrating that we have been brought close to God. We have been welcomed into

God's presence through Christ. And because I'm such a liturgical nerd, I'm going to quote the liturgy of the Easter Vigil: The power of [Easter] dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy; it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride. Night truly blessed, when heaven is wedded to earth and we are reconciled with God!

And we know that outcome. We're Easter people. The reason we gather for worship on Sundays is to celebrate the resurrection. Every Sunday is an Easter Celebration. And so we celebrate Mardi Gras here as Easter people. We're not partying just because we're about to give up something. We're partying because we're a part of God's family. We're partying because we have been invited on a Lenten journey, and we're about ready to depart. And we're partying because we know that Easter, the queen of seasons and crown of the liturgical year, is at the end of that Lenten Journey.

But Lent's not quite here yet. We have two more day of Shrovetide! Let's sing our Alleluias, Let's have fun, let's eat our pastries and pancakes. And let's celebrate as Easter people. Happy Mardi Gras!