

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a lighted candle or votive, a small bowl of water, and small evergreen branch at the center of your group.

LEADER: Compassionate God, open our eyes to your presence and our hearts to your love.

ALL: We live in your presence.

LEADER: God of Mystery, you are at once far beyond all we can imagine and closer to us than we are to ourselves.

ALL: We live in your presence.

LEADER: Let us recognize your intimate presence, loving God, within, among, and around us. *Pause.*

LEADER: We live in your presence and love.

ALL: May we be transforming agents of your love. Amen.

LEADER: *Sprinkles group.*

Each year the Church reflects on Jesus' transfiguration on the 2nd Sunday of Lent. The vision challenges us to look toward Easter, to envision our hopes and prayers for transformation and renewal this Lent.

Today we face polarized times when neighbors and family members aren't always talking. Fake news thrives. Violence is so frequent that fatigue sets in unless the violence touches us. What can transform us?

One answer is conversation, learning where others come

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

from. Conversation followed Father Bryan Massingale's talk on racism this fall at St. Catherine University. He used a ruler as a time line, explaining slavery lasted for 7.5 inches; reconstruction, 1 inch; Jim Crow, 2.25 inches; legal equality, 1.25 inches (1968). He made the point racism isn't over.

Indeed, an African American woman in her late 20s in my group of three remembered that her grandparents had to sit in a back section in the Catholic church where they worshiped. We talked about the Jesuits at Georgetown University selling their slaves and now making reparation.

A month later our religious community spent a Saturday morning on racism and white privilege. We talked in fives. I learned more. One question asked, "When do you pretend?" Not much, I thought, but the gay man in our group said, "I have to decide all the time who I will be in groups and at work."

Conversations also happened at a Come Together gathering of prayer and

song. A student from Zimbabwe described worries for her family's safety as she followed news that the only president she has known was forced to step down. A mom with a biracial child shared her fears for the child.

Bonnie Steele, who helped start the Come Together movement, described the police chase and shooting that threatened her children and led her family to move. As three of us talked, a white woman recalled being stopped by the police and having to open the trunk of the car for the officer to get her purse and identification. The black woman in our group shook her head. "In the black community opening the trunk risks having marijuana or other drugs planted there as a reason to arrest you." Again I learned.

● What conversations have opened your eyes to where others come from?



GOSPEL

Jesus transfigures his disciples' vision.



NARRATOR 1: Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain with him.

NARRATOR 2: He was transformed before their eyes. His clothes became dazzling white—whiter than snow, whiter than any bleach on earth could make them.

NARRATOR 1: Then they saw Elijah and Moses; they were talking with Jesus.

PETER: Teacher, how good it is for us to be here. Let us build three booths, one for you, one for Elijah, and one for Moses.

NARRATOR 2: Peter hardly knew what to say; they were all very afraid.

NARRATOR 1: A cloud came, overshadowing them, and out of the cloud a voice.

VOICE: This is my son, my beloved. Listen to him.

NARRATOR 2: Suddenly looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them—only Jesus.

NARRATOR 1: As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus gave them an order.

JESUS: Tell no one what you have seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.

NARRATOR 2: They did what he asked, though they discussed among themselves.

PETER: What does rise from the dead mean?

Mark 9.2-10

tantalize them. The scene ends with the three disciples in conversation, discussing, “What does rise from the dead mean?”

Conversation is a regular literary form in the gospel. Jesus doesn’t just preach; he interacts and stirs up curiosity about who he is. Conversations with his disciples in the gospel invite us to join in.

● What does rise from the dead mean?

Jesus’ ministry evolves. His 40 days in the desert lead him in a new direction. He begins a public ministry—announcing God is near, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Shortly before he leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain, Jesus alerts them that his ministry is turning from preaching and healing in Galilee to confronting religious authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus anticipates he will suffer, die, and rise after three days. This is the conversation the disciples continue after the transfiguration.

In Mark’s gospel Jesus’ passion predictions anticipate his whole story for us readers, so we see unfolding events in the light of the resurrection. But the disciples are often

Jesus’ transfiguration calls us to prayer and commitment.

The transfiguration gospel creates a visual in words. It illuminates Jesus’ evolving understanding of his own mission and ministry. In dazzling white, Jesus stands between two prophets who have gone before him and exhausted their lives in leading God’s people and delivering God’s message. Peter, James, and John stand in awe in front of Jesus, apostles who come after him in history to spread his good news.

The vision includes conversation. The prophets Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus, but Mark’s gospel doesn’t reveal the topic. Peter speaks amazement at the vision, wanting to build booths for each prophet. A voice from heaven claims Jesus as “My Son, my beloved.”

As they come down the mountain, Jesus insists that Peter, James, and John tell no one what they have seen until “the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” Jesus’ words

fearful, sometimes amazed, curious, bewildered, confused. In these eyewitness disciples, we Christians today have people whose faith flounders, flops, and fails but also slowly develops and grows. Mark wants us to have hope our faith can strengthen as theirs does.

The possibility that Jesus comes to understand his work in the world more fully as his life goes on is comforting. We also come to appreciate our own gifts and our own ability to bring about transformation as we pray and interact with others over our lifetimes.

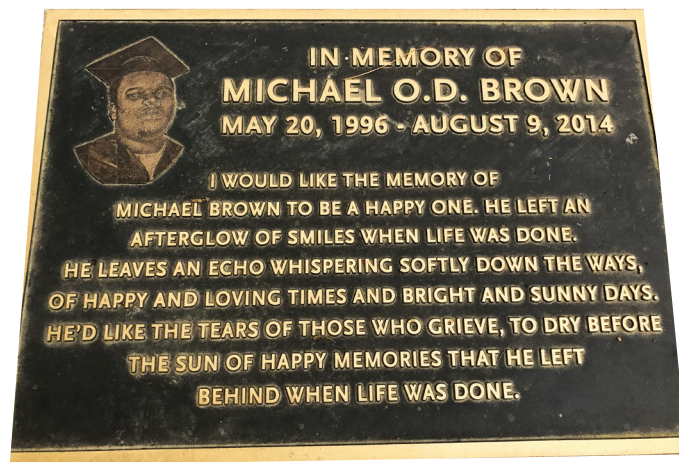
Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus not only to the mountain but to the garden after the last supper where Jesus' ministry evolves further in his prayer. In the garden the three disciples sleep as Jesus asks that the coming suffering be taken from him. In the end he says, "Not my will but yours be done."

The Orthodox Church sees in the transfiguration what the whole of Christian life is about—transformation into Christ. Prayer leads to transforming communion with God. The mystical leads to the prophetic; communion leads to action.

Not only Jesus but also his disciples will need this profound, prayerful heartening to sustain them on the journey to Jerusalem and beyond. Life at the foot of the mountain will test the vision.

Sunday's gospel is a story about vision that surfaces in

prayer and opens the future over and over in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The transfiguration challenges us to prayer, vision, and heart for encountering life with Christian commitment.



- How has deep change happened in your life?
- What vision for your future surfaces when you pray and reflect on who you are and want to be?
- What experiences of God's presence have opened your future?

The voice from heaven in Sunday's gospel makes the same claim about Jesus at the transfiguration as it did at his baptism. "This is my beloved Son" (Mark 1.11; 9.7). The baptismal scene launches Jesus' ministry. The transfiguration scene identifies the time when Jesus' disciples will begin their ministry. They are to tell no one what they have seen and heard on the mountain until after Jesus has

risen from the dead. Then the fishing for people to which Jesus calls them will begin.

Their journey of discipleship holds the promise of sharing the transfiguring life of God. The messiah comes to serve, not to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10.45). His suffering is born of a passion for the world, a love that endures unto death.

This Lent, the first disciples call us to renew our own lifelong journey into Jesus' paschal mystery.

- What passion to serve the world and its people do you experience?
- In what activities do you glimpse transfiguring visions for our society today?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

- For 10 years public radio interviewer Krista Tippett has modeled and furthered civil conversations to promote having difficult interactions and appreciate where people come from in our polarized times. Her website [On Being](http://OnBeing.org) has many interviews catalogued at Civilconversationsproject.org. Start conversations in your parish or neighborhood.

“Ready,” replies Abraham.

Sunday’s first and second scripture readings raise difficult questions. What kind of God would ask Abraham to take his son up into the heights and sacrifice him (Genesis 22)? What kind of God does not withhold God’s own son but gives him up for all of us (Romans 8.32)? Can this God be the same one who transfigures Jesus on the mountain in such a dazzling way that the disciples want to remain there forever to bask in the loveliness?

Scholars have at least three ways to explain the story of Abraham and Isaac. First, some explain that stories from this ancient period are not historical. The stories are not written as history to record facts and events accurately. Rather this story that originated in oral traditions and comes down generations to us is not history but a tale with a moral.

The moral is that obedience results in great blessing. The question of what kind of God requires such sacrifice drops out of the picture.

Second, some interpret the meaning of the story to suggest that Abraham got God’s message wrong. At the critical moment God stays Abraham’s hand and says to him in effect, “I really appreciate what you were willing to do, but this is not what I want. Don’t kill Isaac. There is a ram in the bushes. Sacrifice the ram instead.” In this view

Abraham realizes that God is compassionate and does not desire human sacrifice.

The third view dismisses the God of the Abraham story. People who hold this view contend that a God of vengeance and violence simply is not consistent with their own experience of God and with ways God is imaged in other places in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In fact, we must get beyond this way of imaging God, which has done immense damage in both religious and political spheres all over the earth.

Abraham offers Isaac.

God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, “Abraham!” “Ready!” he replied. Then God said: “Take your son, Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you.”

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

But the Lord’s messenger called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger. “Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.”

As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.

Again the Lord’s messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said: “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed my command.”

Genesis 22.1-2,9,10-13,15-18

- How do you view the Abraham and Isaac story? How do you interpret its meaning?
- What do you feel God expects of you?

PRAY

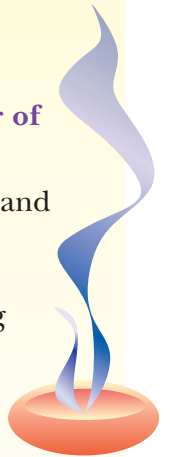
LEADER: If we seek God, we will find God.

ALL: May people everywhere experience the transforming power of God’s nearness.

LEADER: May the earth and all its beings rejoice in Sacred Presence, and may this Presence bring us energy for the work ahead.

ALL: If we seek God, we will find God on the path we walk. Amen.

Conclude with a sign of peace.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.