

**MAGNIFICAT FAITH: HOLY LAUGHTER; PSALM 2, MATTHEW 17:1-9;
TRANSFIGURATION, 2.24.20; THOMAS YORTY; WESTMINSTER**

I remember the night before the Ironman my son Ian and I did at Lake Placid back in 2011. The organizers figured out everything the participants would need before our alarm clocks went off at 4am the next day.

They threw a big spaghetti dinner party – 3,000 people under a huge tent – ‘carb loading’ that would provide energy for the all-day ordeal. The ‘voice’ for Ironman events – a combination of circus ring leader and a football coach before the big game – was the MC. His goal was to inspire us, so he asked the oldest triathlete to stand – an 83 year old man; and the youngest, a fifteen year old boy.

He solicited tips for rookies. One 30 something woman had the best advice for the swim. She said avoid getting pushed to the outside or inside because you run the risk of swimming farther than you need to or crossing into the inner penalty zone. She said, go right to the middle of the three-thousand person pack. You’ll get hit with all the flailing arms and legs for the first fifteen minutes of mayhem, but then you’ll find your own lane which will be shorter and faster. We did just as she said and completed the 2.4 mile swim in personal record time. We left the dinner feeling energized, physically and tactically ready for the big day. And nervous.

Next week is the first Sunday of the forty days of Lent which we might compare, with a little imagination, to a spiritual Ironman, at least the Lent of days gone by. Some used to choose abstinence of one kind or another to remind them of our dependence on God; others added a spiritual practice to their daily routine. But Lent more recently has become a virtual experience; absent the spiritual rigor and carving out time for embracing new practices; yet, I invite all of us to consider making this Lent a spiritual challenge; to make it a journey of the soul with Jesus as he fulfills his mission in Jerusalem.

And today, Transfiguration Sunday is like that big spaghetti dinner in Lake Placid. Jesus takes his disciples up the mountain where they see him transformed: face shining like the sun, clothes white as light; talking with the heroes of Israel, Moses and Elijah; then the voice of God from heaven identifies Jesus as the beloved son of God and instructs the disciples to “Listen to him.”

On their way back into the valley, Jesus says they are going to Jerusalem where he will be interrogated by the authorities and suffer and die at the hands of evil men and; he tells them they will need perseverance and resolve to make it through. Seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah, receiving God’s instruction prepares and inspires them for the journey.

The other Scripture lesson today prepares us in a different way for the long journey of Lent. It too is a kind of transfiguration text. Did your ears perk up when the choir chanted verse 4, “the One enthroned in heaven laughs.”

That's right! God laughs at the leaders of the nations who conspire against God and each other. They assume, not unlike the leaders who built the tower of Babel that they are in charge will soon be in control of the earth.

What does God do? God laughs! It is the only reference in the bible to God laughing. When we have a comeuppance we often say God has a fine sense of humor. When God looks at the kings of the nations and their delusional plans God laughs and brings down those who are lifted up.

Psalm 1 describes a righteous person; Psalm 2 juxtaposes this portrait with the picture of human corruption and greed, "the nations conspire and the people plot in vain; the kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord and his Anointed One." Dare we lift this verse from its encapsulated moment in history and apply it to the present time?

We're talking politics here – kings and plotting. Politics is the way we organize ourselves and exercise power over one another. There are leaders who exercise their authority responsibly for the good of the people and there are leaders who exercise authority for their own benefit and gain. Such leaders often hurt the people they hold the sacred authority of their position for. If the Law and the Prophets of the bible make anything clear, they make clear that a ruler who hurts a nation's people is a ruler who, aware of it or not, is plotting against God.

What is God's response? The one who rules in heaven laughs. I learned early in my ministry that humor cuts both ways; it is a two-edged sword, as Aristotle said, "there is a good deal of aggression in humor." From the pen of Voltaire to the monologue of Stephen Colbert humor is as effective at countering the abuse of power by heads of state as force of arms.

Humor among friends and family ought to be used with sensitivity, but humor used to humiliate and dethrone a person of pomposity or bullying, especially when such a person is in a position of power, is appropriate – because the one making the jokes is God.

What can we conclude from this psalm? Just as it would be unfitting to use Colbert's opening remarks as a basis for good government or foreign policy, Psalm 2 is not a treatise on executive power but a signal to the faithful not to take the leaders of the nations, even our own nation, too seriously.

Rather to see the ranting, raving, and mayhem of kings and dictators past and present as laughable. Which is not to say that it is also utterly dangerous and threatening to our way of life, but it is to say that it is foolish, arrogant, rude and reckless and those qualities in a leader who presupposes respect and honor is the first and biggest joke of all.

It is why Colbert keeps so many of us sane on some days. He reminds us of the utter absurdity of the sometimes too real day to day machinations from Washington. And the absurdity of such corrupt use of power, as the world witnessed in Pope Leo X who tried to silence Luther, or Mary Tudor nicknamed Bloody who sought to reverse the English Reformation or Stalin or Hitler, or Assad or Putin or Kim Jong un all of whom fail the

test of time, collapse under the weight of their own hubris and are or will be blown away as dust by the wind of history.

We are guilty of not protesting when we see the usurping of the power of the attorney general; or the disregard and removal of career diplomats who faithfully labor to uphold and defend the constitution; or the shaming and name calling of any who disagree from heads of the intelligence agencies to members of the same party.

The streets should be filled with chanting marchers holding placards. But we are busy people. We have our own lives to live. And perhaps public protest seems risky, distasteful, or inappropriate for the way we were raised.

So what are we to do? Psalm 2 tells us this morning we are to laugh!

Psalm 2 exposes the ridiculousness of those in power who benefit from respect for office and tradition; Psalm 2 says the emperor has no clothes.

What's all this got to do with Transfiguration and Lent? In the case of God's holy laughter we witness nothing less than the transfiguration of earthly rulers; transfigured not to light and blessing but to exposure of true colors and self-serving aims.

Let me be clear. The bible is, in sum, The Epic Battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Jesus was, in toto, God's complete and perfect rejection of evil and the fear of evil; and God's affirmation of the universal and eternal truth of love. What we gather here to do each week is nothing less than to steel, nourish, and prepare ourselves for this Ironman epic of a battle against darkness; forces that would invade our own lives, our own thinking, our own conduct and behavior. Forces that even now as we speak are at work seeking ways to slither into, wrap around then suffocate what is vital and good and generous in our hearts, our communities, and our policies and institutions.

Lent is nothing less than the work of God's people preparing themselves and our world for the coming of God's kingdom; and because this work is long and hard and will likely go on after us not to conclude until some future moment in God's own timing; because this work is difficult, as we return from the mountain with Jesus into the valley to begin our Lenten journey I invite us to embrace the resolve Jesus urges upon his disciples.

So here's a plan for our observance of a holy Lent. Start with laughter – when we hear our leaders speak with vitriol, when they condemn each other in the struggle to claim the mantel of their party – as the Democrats are now doing; when the President talks about 'Making America Great Again'; when *we take politics too seriously* and get caught up in criticizing the leaders we dislike and worshipping the ones admire let a still small giggle bubble up from your toes; and if it turns into a belly laugh all the better. Nothing defuses a bully or tension in a conversation like laughter.

When our leaders talk as if they were God, take us to war, and promise us they will provide safety and security if we only give them unquestioning loyalty and allegiance, it's okay to laugh.

When the President claimed to be a Presbyterian during his first campaign and the national church held a press conference informing the world that Donald J. Trump was not on the rolls of any PCUSA congregation it was a funny and a failed attempt to wed politics and religion to appeal to religious voters. And when his first Attorney General Jeff Sessions *who is a member* of the United Methodist Church quoted St. Paul to justify the separation of children from their parents at the border his attempt at biblical exegesis was so lame you could hear God roaring with laughter.

So as winter gives way to spring and status quo politics ignores the world's problems don't forget to laugh a little. And after a good laugh at the pomposity and presumption of the world's nations, remember God threatens to send One who will come and teach us a lesson; it will be a day when God will send a true King, one whom God calls "Son," a great sovereign who will rebuke and confront the nations and call them to account.

And God does just that in sending Jesus of Nazareth. He came among us, not wearing a royal robe, not marching in a grand military parade, not backed with a huge military force, but he comes to us as a powerless rabbi who never lifted his hand against us but reaches out to us in love.

Thus, God says with a smile, that'll teach them a thing or two, knock those cunning politicians down a peg, show them who really sits on the throne. I'll never forget jogging out of the staging area with Ian for the Ironman at Lake Placid *after* we had swum 2.4 miles and ridden our bikes through the Adirondack mountains 112 miles.

As we were heading down Main St. I said to him, "Ian, I have some good news." "What's that?" he said. "All we have to do now is run a marathon."

It was a bit of gallows humor but we both actually laughed and suddenly the weight of the next six hours of running was lifted and I thought to myself, "I think we can do this."

We've got a spiritual marathon we are about to embark upon starting this Ash Wednesday.

If we listen for and laugh with God's holy laughter at human presumption and self-importance we just might be able to keep our hearts and minds focused where they belong.

Our true source of safety and security is Jesus, the itinerant peasant, no account, laughable rabbi who shames kings and dictators and reminds us all how to treat each other and especially those who are poor. Amen.

