

## LAST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY TRANSFIGURATION YEAR B, FEBRUARY 11, 2024

In 2008 a French film by the name of “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” told the true story of a journalist Jean Dominique Bauby who had a devastating stroke at the age of 43. The stroke left him paralyzed except for one blinking eye. He could hear and see and comprehend, but it was as though he was captive in that old fashioned constricting diving bell that goes undersea. The doctor told him he had a rare condition called “locked-in syndrome.” He was conscious but imprisoned in an inert body.

Jean-Dominique was plunged into pain and darkness but was literally transfigured through an extraordinary transformation of himself through the help of a therapist. The therapist and Jean together developed a method of communication by blinking the alphabet letter by letter.

He actually wrote a book to tell of his struggle and his hopes. The evocative title comes from Bauby's notion that while his body was submerged and weighted down and impossible to move his imagination and memory were still free and as light as a butterfly's wings: "My cocoon becomes less oppressive, and my mind takes flight like a butterfly", he wrote.

In his book he said he had been a self-centered man, whose life was now irreversibly changed by his stroke which led to more changes he had to make. His transformation became his liberation that touched the hearts of his family and millions of readers. Those who encountered him were also transformed by the deep and vital struggle he made to break out of the locked world in which he was trapped and reconnect with them. His transformation was what we would call a transfiguration that was basically shaped by the power of love by his family and his therapist.

On this last Sunday after the Epiphany, we encounter one of those mystical moments that's designed to make us sit up and pay attention. It's commonly known as the Transfiguration. That story appears in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Transfiguration communicates more than anything that we are loved as Jesus is loved. That is the gift of Transfiguration – the gift of love. It's really a story about how in Jesus, we all can come face to face with the radiance of God which give us a tiny glimpse of the divine love that is being offered to all of creation.

The whole season of Epiphany is about the themes of light and darkness and good and evil. The question is how do we overcome darkness and evil? How do we find that radiance of God's love to help us through those dark times in our lives? Is love really the weapon against darkness and evil? Let me tell you another story. How many of you ever read Madeleine L'Engle's book “A Wrinkle in Time”? The book was published 62 years ago and combines quantum physics, Christian theology and a cosmic battle of good and evil

\*“In this book, the heroine is an unlikely gawky, brilliant teenage girl who just somehow doesn't feel like she fits in in high school. Her younger brother Charles is sort of off-the-charts scary smart. They pick up a friend from high school along the way named Calvin and these three children are charged with the responsibility and opportunity to save their father who has been imprisoned in this planet that's been taken over by the Dark Thing. And it's run by this evil disembodied brain called IT. This Dark Thing and evil IT seeks to overtake the universe and it's important that they get to their

father and they start to combat the evil that is engulfing the universe. But they also have help from three celestial beings.

With time travel and with the assistance of these three celestial beings, they get to the evil planet and they find their father and they are able to get their father out. But they can't take the younger brother Charles because he's been captured by this evil IT. It's taken over his mind and his thinking and his speech and everything. They realize that once they escape, one of them has to go back to get Charles. It becomes obvious that only one person can get Charles and that's Meg, his older sister. Despite the protests of her father and friend Calvin, she's the only one and it's a dangerous journey. She knows she's likely not to be successful, much less live to tell the tale.

But the three celestial beings tell her they won't let her go without sending her with gifts, tools for her toolbox. And listen carefully to what they give Meg. Mrs. Whatsit says, "Meg, no matter what, remember, I love you. You are loved." Mrs. Who quotes Scripture, even though it's not identified as such—it's a passage from First Corinthians where God speaks about the foolish being wiser than the wise and the weak being able to take over the strong that ultimately says God's in charge no matter what. And then Mrs. Which says. "Meg, you have one thing that IT doesn't have and that's your only weapon, but only you can find it, only you can discover it."

So with this, Meg is transported back to the evil, dark thing planet. She encounters her brother Charles and he immediately, because he's under the control of the evil thing called IT, starts spewing venom and lies and hate. And Meg starts to respond in kind with hate and loathing and as she does, she feels that she's being taken over and being sucked in by this IT evil brain. IT didn't lack for hate or evil, that was not the answer, but she felt herself getting pulled and sucked away, and then IT, through Charles, made a fatal mistake. IT said, "Mrs Whatsit hates you." And she knew that was a lie. Then she knew what she had that IT didn't have and that was love, the love that surpasses all understanding. You see, you can't fight hate with hate. Tit for tat doesn't work. Jesus taught that the most important things were to love God with your heart, mind, soul and spirit, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And as Meg lived into that love, that overwhelming love she had for her brother, he broke free from the evil clutches of IT. What she had was love. The story ends as they go back and the family is reunited."

What a Wrinkle in Time highlights is that Meg is a warrior. She uses all her faults that she is criticized and bullied for and uses them to bring light and love to her brother. This is the story of the Transfiguration. The disciples, just like us, with all their and our faults are willing to face the darkness and bring the best of themselves and ourselves to the light for the world. This is our calling. We are called to be warriors of love.

God's reassuring love tells us that even when we are knocked down, we have a choice, we can either lie there and get pounded on or we can accept God's invitation to be transformed by God's love and be a warrior for God's love.

All that is asked of us is to listen. The writer of Mark does not tell us that God gave a whole lot of directions to the disciples on that mountain. No, in this story when God spoke through that opening in the clouds, God said, "This is my son, listen to him." So that's the plan. That's the hope and the vision. God does not condemn. God does not chastise. God wants us to pay attention to Jesus and spend our lives acting on what

we hear. This is one of the clearest, and most neglected, commandments of the scriptures.

Listen to Jesus and you will know God's hopes for you. Listen to him, be like him, speak like him, pray like him, act like him, love like him. We don't just witness the transfiguration, we can be transfigured, and God is showing us the way. This is the way out of our locked-in lives, our aversion to change, our personal struggles and the way forward into a future that knows God's peace and justice.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke of being transfigured by the power of God this way. He said: "We are God's partners, God's agents of transfiguration, to change the ugliness of the world, its hatred, its hostilities, its jealousies, its hunger, its poverty, its injustice, its oppression, its alienation, its loneliness, its rivalry, its competitiveness, its grasping, its sickness, into their glorious counterparts; so that there will be laughter and joy, caring and sharing, justice, reconciliation and peace, compassion."

That's the call of a transfigured life to all of us. It calls us, as our baptismal covenant states, to justice, to honesty, to humility, to the service of God's children regardless of race, sexual orientation or language. And the question for each of us is whether we are willing to listen and let this way of life be our way of life. Amen

\*Excerpt from the Rev. Canon Jan Naylor Cope sermon at Washington Cathedral, Feb 11, 2018