

“Things are Possible.” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (8/6/2023,
The Feast of the Transfiguration)

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Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera* premiered on Broadway in January 1988. It did not close until April of this year, 2023. That’s 35 years, over 13,000 performances.

Of the same show.

Now, if you are an actor, you may be used to the concept of doing the same play every day for a week, or a month, or even maybe a couple of years. But as far as I know, no actor has ever done a play for 35 years straight, including the stars of *Phantom* on Broadway.

But do you know who had been there 35 years, or close to it? Do you know who had been doing the same thing, day in and day out, at those shows, for all that time?

The musicians in the pit orchestra.

NPR’s *This American Life* recently did a show called “The Walls Close In,” a show about “people finding themselves stuck in small spaces—an elevator, an attic, an orchestra pit—trying to make sense of their surroundings.”

What would it be like to play the same music for your entire adult life? Your entire career? Night after night after night?

And not only to play the same music, but to see the same people?

Let me let you hear from some of the musicians who were interviewed in this episode:

- Melanie Feld (oboist): “a feeling of nausea that you have to do it again”
- Melanie Feld: “a physical sensation that I get of literally jumping out of my skin. I can’t stay in my skin. I’m going crazy.”
- Pete Reit (horn player): “I would look at the music sometimes, and it would just literally look like shapes. I would just see circles and lines and dots. I would have no idea. I wouldn’t even know what page I was on.”
- Kurt Coble (violinist): “I’m a violin operator. It’s very technical. I have no emotional connection with it.”
- Francis Bonny (trumpeter) would turn his back to everybody because he didn’t want to look at them. “Looked at the white wall, went and played the show, and then left the theater. Left the premises as fast as I could, and it worked beautifully.”
- Or, finally, Lowell Hershey, trumpeter who couldn’t play even a little bit of the show when asked to do so outside that context.

There is something happening here that is fascinating psychologically, something that has to do with our desire as humans for fresh, new experiences, something about what happens to us when we begin to feel the walls closing in and the

drudgery and sameness of life—the same thing day after day after day—beginning to chip away at our sense of individuality, meaning, and purpose.

The French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre made it his life's work to describe this feeling, the feeling of the sameness and alienation of existence experienced in the modern world. The word he came up with to best describe this feeling: nausea.

It's something not unlike the feeling I get looking at the 10-day weather forecast this summer. Mostly Sunny, 106. Mostly Sunny, 105. Sunny, 105. Mostly Sunny, 106. Oh, look, a cool day, 104!

There's a show called Reservation Dogs—season 3 just premiered—about indigenous people in Oklahoma. In the first episode of this season, an older character named Teeny is speaking to her niece, Elora, about all the ways in which adults struggle, in many cases more than young people. She asks Elora, who is in her 20s, to imagine what she was like at 11, whether or not she felt the same as she does now, whether she has the same emotional landscape she did then.

Elora says yes, it does feel basically the same. Then Teeny drops this profound and deeply resonant piece of truth on Elora: “I feel the same as I did when I was your age. There's no miraculous change. You're the same person you were when you first opened your eyes. Except, when you're an adult, you have baggage, and the baggage gets heavier. And that's what changes people.”

I'll be turning 45 a week from today, and in some ways, Teeny's observation feels very true to my own experience. There are times that I can now almost feel the wheel of time shifting in my life, as though the ship of my life is being turned, slowly and methodically.

Sameness and change, routine and interruption: these are the very building blocks of life, the markers of our existence. We do the same things often out of necessity and habit, like eating, sleeping, going to school or work, coming here to church; and yet, every time we do those things, we are a slightly different person.

Where do we go for the kind of deep encouragement, the lasting faith that will enable us to climb out of the monotony of life, and at the same time will help us to weather the sometimes violent and sudden upheavals of life?

Let's go to the Transfiguration.

I think the Transfiguration is a story for our time.

It is a bizarre story, and one of the only times in Scripture that a miracle happens *to* Jesus, rather than Jesus accomplishing the miracle himself.

Another challenging thing about the story is that the miracle doesn't seem, at first glance, to have a clear meaning. Jesus's other miracles have a purpose. Healings make sense. Exorcisms make sense. Making more loaves and fish for hungry people

makes sense. But “his clothes became dazzling white?” . . . okay? What’s the point here?

Three of the four Gospels record this event, all with slightly different emphases. In Mark’s retelling of the Transfiguration, he admits that the three disciples did not know what to say, they were so frightened.

Transfigurations can be dicey, after all. We’ve all seen them before, ourselves, in fact. A transfiguration is any change in form or appearance. When a family member has a stroke and loses the ability to speak. When a friend has a profound moment of self-realization and seeks out the help she so desperately needs. When a baby is born and takes its first breath. When someone dies and takes their final breath. When someone finds their person, their life partner, the one who gives them such joy their entire countenance changes. Transfigurations abound in human life, small or large miracles that change our perception of the thing that had been right in front of us all along, the thing that we now see in a different light.

This event—it feels like I should call it an “event” rather than a story, and it’s certainly not a teaching of Jesus, so I’m going to keep calling it an “event”—this event is not just about Jesus frightening the disciples, or appearing before them in bright, shining clothing, or giving them a job to do.

It's about self-disclosure. Self-revelation. It's a moment in which Jesus wants to show them who he really is. To peel back even a fraction of the veil in a moment, to allow even a glimpse of the Eternal Glory that Jesus has always shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

It's a moment not unlike the one in which Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples ask "Who is this person? That even the wind and the waves obey him," a statement that combines fear, and wonder, and awe.

It is one thing, after all, to note the presence of swirling storms all around us in life. To look around and feel overwhelmed, small, helpless, and alone.

And it is another thing altogether to actually see the grace of God sweep in and change things.

For Jesus to appear to his friends with the Light of God, the Light of Creation, is to show them that they can never again interpret their own lives in the dim light of this world. The dim light of this world shows us sameness and monotony, drudgery, pain, failure, sin: but the Light of Creation, the Light of God, is always new, always beautiful, always hopeful. The Light of God fills all the gaps, every dark place in our life, and re-orient us to the Dawn of Creation, the Light in which we see that everything, really, is grace. That everything is a gift.

Rowan Williams puts it this way. In this Light, the Light of God that illuminated Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration, "our lives, like those of Moses and Elijah, may have meanings we can't know of

in this present moment: the real depth and significance of what we say or do now won't appear until more of the light of Christ has been seen. And so what we think is crucially important may not be so; what we think insignificant may be what really changes us.”

I've been rewatching *The Office* over the past few months, the entire series from beginning to end. And there are many good spiritual lessons in that show, and one of the best is something like what Rowan Williams is saying here. People thrown together by accident, living with one another through the drudgery and monotony of everyday life—for years—and coming out of that experience actually and profoundly changed. Finding that even those most insignificant moments—like Jim and Pam's harmless flirting and silliness in the first couple of seasons—can turn into a beautiful story of love, and marriage, and family, not one without pain and struggle, but something transfigured nevertheless. Something beautiful. As Pam says in the very last line of the show, “There's a lot of beauty in ordinary things. Isn't that kind of the point?”

It is easy to imagine that the story of the Transfiguration is about the human Jesus showing the disciples that he's really God. But it is also about the Divine Jesus showing the disciples that he's really human. It is about God reaching into the human dimension, the human experience, so often characterized by pain, and darkness, and incompleteness and pronouncing a blessing on us, allowing us to see that there is a depth to our place in this world that we are not aware of. That something—or someone, more accurately—is holding us up, even and especially in the times in which we feel frightened, abandoned, confused, and alone. That

there is joy, and beauty, and life, and light, always and everywhere radiating from the heart of Jesus, our friend, our brother, our savior, our God.

Rowan Williams interprets the light of the Transfiguration as the Light of the Eighth Day, the Day past the seventh day of Creation, the Day of Re-Creation and Re-Newal, the Day in which All Things become intelligible and understandable on the other side of this life.

And so in the strength of even a glimpse of that light, he says “things become possible. We can confront today’s business with new thoughts and feelings, reflect on our sufferings and our failures with some degree of hope—not with a nice and easy message of consolation but with the knowledge that there is a depth to the world’s reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human beings.”

That’s a deep quote, and there’s a lot there, but some of the best words in that quote are the most general. “Things become possible.” “the light which will somehow connect.”

I don’t know about you, but there are days in my life in which it seems as though no things are possible. That spiritual malaise in which there is no horizon, in which I can’t seem to see anything beyond the mountains of anxiety and fear right in front of me. But in the light of Christ, THINGS become possible. Getting out of bed. Brushing my teeth. Going to work. Having a difficult conversation. Checking a loved one into rehab. Signing divorce

papers. Retiring. Helping a child through a breakup. In the light of Christ, THINGS become possible.

This light—this light, this Transfiguration Light will—somehow—connect all of our painful experiences. Connect us to one another, and connect us to God.

In Dante's Divine Comedy, the final vision the author has of Heaven is of Light. Nothing but Light. And a book. The book, Dante says, that is ingathered and bound by love into one single volume; everything that in the universe seems separate and scattered will be connected, whole, One. And we are the pages in that book, and our story is still being written, by the Author of Love. The Author of Light. The Author of Life.

AMEN.