

Feast of the Transfiguration

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Some would say everything went south when Tim Kreider decided to rent a herd of goats. Tim insists that a friend's accidental "reply all" to an email was the source of the trouble. Regardless, here's what happened. Tim Kreider rented the goats, for reasons he says aren't pertinent to the rest of us. And then he sent a mass email replete with photographs to establish a) he really did have goats, and b) it was good.

He described what followed thusly: "Most of the responses I received expressed appropriate admiration and envy of my goats, but the message in question was intended not as a response to me but as an aside to some of the recipient's co-workers, sighing over the kinds of expenditures on which I was frittering away my uncomfortable income. The word 'oof' was used."

Anybody else have a lingering worry of being found out as a failure in the eyes of others? Or even just finding out that they think that?

Strangely enough, I remembered Tim Kreider's "oof" this week when I read an article about something called "brain-to-brain interfaces."

Two guys are sitting in nondescript buildings in Seattle. One has a large magnetic coil pressed against his head that can induce an electrical current in the brain. And the other guy, a mile away, was staring at a screen while 64 electrodes in a shower cap recorded his brain activity.

Now, trust me. My comprehension of what I've just described is almost certainly way foggier than yours is. But the result of the experiment was that when the guy in the shower cap concentrates just so on a dot on that screen, the magnetic coil delivers a pulse to the head of the other guy and his hand jolts up and falls back down on a touch pad, which fires a cannon in a video game and a virtual city is saved. Got it? One guy thinks something, and another guy, a mile away, acts.

The true believers in brain-to-brain interfaces — people like America's mad scientist in chief, Elon Musk — think that human language is just too clumsy and imprecise as a means of getting the information from one person's head into the head of someone else. They'd like to link up our brains directly and eliminate the pesky miscommunications — whether emails or sidelong glances — that we've resigned ourselves to living with.

But here's the problem. What good is perfect communication of the truth from one brain to another, if what we fear most is being found out? Aren't we all goat renters or some form of failure deeper down, hoping against hope that nobody will notice?

I realize some of you may be thinking a brain-to-brain interface is your only hope at seeing a flicker of connection between rented goats, shower caps of electrodes, and the Transfiguration. But here's my best try.

The Transfiguration takes place in all three synoptic gospels. It's in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And in all three, it takes place soon after a really pivotal moment in the story. Jesus asks his disciples who the crowds say that he is. And they say, "Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah or one of the prophets." And then he says, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter pipes up with the right answer to this pop identity-of-Jesus quiz. He says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!"

So, that's great, right? Usually Jesus is conveying whatever the Aramaic term for "oof" is about the confusions and misunderstandings of his disciples. But here Peter clearly got the divine email that was actually meant for him. Or somehow the truth about Jesus got from Jesus's brain to Peter's brain intact, no electrified shower caps needed, as far as we know.

So that's great, right? Peter knows the truth.

But what follows would surely mystify Elon Musk and us too, if we're honest. To Peter and to all the disciples listening, Jesus says, "Don't tell anyone who I am." And then he paints a dark but vivid picture of what it actually means to be the Messiah, the anointed one. It means he's been anointed, not to sit on a throne, but anointed to be an utter failure. He's going to suffer. He's going to be rejected by the important people in the realm he really cares about - the realm of his religion. And he's going to be killed, and on the third day, he'll be raised.

You and I are primed to think of that part about being raised as turning the whole story into one of victory instead of failure. But think about it. Why is being raised so great? If a friend told you they were going to be beaten, mocked, tortured and killed, but — oh, by the way — that three days later they'd be alive again, how would you respond? Seriously. What's so great about being raised back into life in a world that did this to you? Would you even want to be?

And then Jesus says that to follow him means walking the very same path. Taking up a cross. Being a failure like he was a failure. In Matthew and Mark, Peter says, "Jesus, this can't be." And Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan," only moments after he's called him Messiah.

Herbert McCabe says, like Peter, we are always trying to find ways in which Jesus wins. He says, "If we can't see him as politically successful, then we think of him as spiritually successful. If he wasn't a conquering hero, then he was a heroic martyr who triumphed over his persecutors by his calm resignation in the face of suffering. But he didn't, of course. He broke down and sweated with terror in the garden of Gethsemane. He wasn't a spiritual success either. By the end he had no disciples left. They had all deserted him. Jesus was an outstanding failure. And that is how he shows us the meaning of God. That is what the Transfiguration is about."

Because we can only appreciate the Transfiguration in this context. The context of the abject failure Jesus's life was to be according to any sane, recognizable human standard.

The Transfiguration, you see, is a story with all kinds of echoes and allusions, isn't it. It looks a lot like Jesus's baptism, with a voice from heaven announcing, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" And it's got all the trappings of an Old Testament encounter with the divine. It's not subtle. Moses himself is there, the first person to shine with glory from being in the presence of God on a mountain. And Elijah was too, the prophet who left earth in a flaming chariot, not death, and who was expected to return to make things right.

It also foreshadows the crucifixion, with the sleepy disciples trying to stay awake in an intense moment for their Lord. In other words, the Transfiguration piles on all the details it can muster to show us that this really is God's presence among us. Because we're going to need shining faces and dazzling white clothes and long gone prophets and more to believe that this failure of a life Jesus just described is going to be what the presence of God looks like in this world, aren't we?

Herbert McCabe presses the point further: "...this is not the kind of spectacular failure that we all really know is a success. It is just the common or garden failure that comes of being human. Jesus died of being human. What was outstanding about him...was just that he was more intensely human, more intensely one of us that we dare to be. He lacked the illusion and deceptions by which we try to protect ourselves from our humanity, try to protect ourselves from our failure. He was like us in all things but sin, in all things but self-deception."

Do you see why we might have to lose the self-deceiving lives we've been making for ourselves if we're ever to see a God like this one?

Surely this is why Jesus could not let Peter and his disciples be satisfied with accurate information in their heads that he is the Messiah. Christians on the left, right, and everywhere in between tend to treat our faith as possessing some essential information about God or ourselves or our world. We just disagree on some of the details. But Jesus says this is not the way God works at all. In fact, God is going to show up unambiguously — shining and glowing on a mountain — but show up as an utter failure so that we might begin to believe that if we are to encounter this God, we're going to have to do so in the mess and muddle and pain of human relationships in a broken and unjust world.

I know. We like stories with happier endings. But this story isn't meant to give us a happy ending to look forward to. It's meant to tell us where the holiness is in our lives right now. And as long as we think

it's in the admirable selves we construct for the same world that crucified Jesus of Nazareth, we just won't get it.

The good news is that God wants to meet us in the lives we've got, not the ones we think he wishes we had.

Which kind of upends our ideas about baptism, doesn't it? Baptism is not about creating a brain-to-brain interface with the divine that washes sin and untruths out of the baptized mind. It's about welcoming another frail human being into the household of God. Which is a household of failures like you and like me and like Jesus himself. It's not a household with standards they'll have to live up to in order to be members of. It's not a household they'll have to ace pop spiritual quizzes to keep their memberships renewed.

In fact, by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are really saying that there is nowhere you can go to escape the embrace of this God. And the only work of Jesus's Church is to live out this strange good news by whatever means we have. To have these children stay close to us, so they can learn in the deepest parts of themselves that even in the messy imperfections and failures of their lives, we will not abandon them. Because we have not been abandoned by the God who showed us who he was by being more intensely human than we dare to be, by not protecting himself against failure, but by walking alone to the far, far end of the darkest road of failure that's ever been.

188 Feasts of the Transfiguration ago, Calvary became a tiny outpost of the Episcopal branch of this Jesus's Church. That's worth bringing our blankets and our font to this splendid lawn to celebrate. But only if we remember who we were baptized to be. Only if we remember that our baptismal promises are about being a community of people whose imperfect but truthful lives give each of us space to let go of our self-deceptions and delusions so that we can actually begin to believe that God would race right back down that dark road again today, even if the only lost, failed soul at the end of it were you.