

Jesus Comes Out

The following text comes from a sermon delivered by GAPIMNY member Rev. Patrick S. Cheng at Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford on February 6, 2005. The gospel readings referenced here are 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 17:1-9.

Good morning! I'm delighted to be here today with you at MCC Hartford. I wanted to thank Pastor George and Rev. Julio for their hospitality and for their wonderful ministry. I've heard so many great things about your congregation over the years, and I feel very blessed finally to be here in person.

Anyway, it's Super Bowl Sunday, which was always a huge day for all the women at MCC New York, where I had served as Assistant Pastor a few years ago. It was right up there with Easter and Pride Sunday. Any football fans out there? I really appreciate the commitment of all the women who showed up to church this morning, even though I have to confess that I don't really understand what all this Super Bowl fuss is about. (My partner Michael tells me that the Patriots are playing again this year.) Well, that's OK—we men have the Academy Awards later this month.

Today we also recognize the Lunar New Year, which is a time that our Asian sisters and brothers around the world celebrate a new beginning with their families and loved ones. I am the coordinator of Queer Asian Spirit, a ministry by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of Asian descent in the U.S. and abroad, so this is an important time for me and for many people in my communities.

Anyway, I usually like to preach about the particular animal that is being honored in a given year. Two years ago, I preached about the Year of the Sheep. That was easy since there are a lot of sheep and shepherds in the Bible. Last year, I preached about the Year of the Monkey. That was harder, since there weren't a lot of monkeys running around in the ancient Near East.

Well, this year is the Year of the Cock, which seems particularly appropriate for a gay church. At least for the men, anyway. Oh, behave! Were any of you born in the Year of the Cock? This is your year if you were born in 1993, 1981, 1969, 1957, 1945, or 1933. Anyone else? According to the Chinese zodiac, roosters are people who are hard working and definite about their decisions. They are not afraid to speak their minds. Famous roosters include Yoko Ono, Mia Farrow, and Rod Stewart.

Astrology aside, the rooster does play an important part in the Christian scriptures, and particularly in the passion narratives. As you may remember, the apostle Peter, who has a central role in both of today's readings, denies Jesus three times before the cock crows. Even though Peter was one of Jesus' closest friends, he was reminded by the rooster about how hard it is to come out about one's faith—something I suspect that a lot of us LGBT Christians have experienced ourselves.

Anyway, what exactly happens to Peter in today's gospel? Well, Peter—along with his fellow apostles James and John—climb up a high mountain with Jesus. While they are there, they see Jesus transfigured, his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white. They also see Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter wants to build three tabernacles to honor them. Suddenly, though, Peter, James and John hear the voice of God proclaiming that Jesus is God's beloved child. The three of them fall down with fear, but Jesus tells them to get up and not to be afraid, and their vision ends. Jesus tells them to be silent about the vision until he has been raised from the dead.

What significance does the Transfiguration have for us today, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of faith? At first glance, it doesn't seem like this story is something that most of us can relate to, unless you happen to go around climbing mountains and seeing visions of Jesus all the time. When I reread this passage yesterday, I thought of the ending of *Return of the Jedi*, when we see the trio of Darth Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Yoda standing around, all aglow in dazzling and shining light. But, as much as I love *Star Wars*, that's probably not the best theological analogy for today's gospel.

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However, the more I thought about today's gospel passage, the more I realized that the Transfiguration is actually something that all of us can relate to. It's the story of Jesus coming out. In other words, the Transfiguration is the story of Jesus revealing his true self to his closest friends. The dazzling divinity that is hidden inside of him becomes visible, for the first time, on the outside. This is confirmed by the presence of Moses and Elijah with him on the mountain top. The Greek word for transfiguration is *metamorphoo*, which means to be changed or transformed into something else. (That's where we get the word metamorphosis.) So, when Jesus comes out to Peter, James and John, he undergoes a metamorphosis and is literally transformed. Indeed, he is affirmed at that moment as God's beloved child.

The fact that you are here this morning at MCC Hartford means that, like Jesus in today's gospel, you have come out in some way also, either about yourself or about someone who you care about. It's no accident that your congregation's vision statement is "Come Out, Come Home." Whenever each of us reveals our inner lives to others, we are transformed, just like Jesus was. The dazzling divinity that is hidden inside of us becomes visible on the outside. We are forever changed, and we are affirmed as God's beloved children.

That's not to say that coming out can't be a scary experience. The apostles who witnessed Jesus coming out fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. Jesus had to touch them and tell them not to be afraid. Many of us have come out to loved ones who were frightened, particularly when cultural or ethnic factors are involved. I remember that when I came out to my mother, her first reaction was to be afraid of what our family and our Asian American friends would think about me. I've heard the same things from my friends who grew up in African American or Latino households. Perhaps that was the same kind of fear—the fear of the unknown—that was experienced by Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration.

Also, coming out is a process that never ends. Yes, it's a huge step to come out to oneself and to one's family, friends, and co-workers. Yes, it's a huge step to go into a gay bar for the first time or the local community center or an MCC church. But coming out is much more than a one-time event. It's an ongoing process, and we are always faced with new situations that force us to decide whether to come out or not. Even Jesus wasn't quite ready to come out to everyone after the Transfiguration! He told Peter, James, and John, for example, that they should be quiet about the vision until he was raised from the dead. But eventually they *did* tell other people about this good news, and the world was forever changed.