

Date: March 2, 2014
Scriptures: 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
Title: Transfigured

I heard Tan Le on NPR a couple of weeks ago.
She was discussing a TED Talk
given in 2011.

There she gave a poignant and powerful glimpse
of her life as an immigrant.

Tan Le says her life is jigsaw puzzle,
not a finished story,
and is still being put together.
One piece of the puzzle is the grandfather
she never met.
He was a poet and playwright
living in Saigon
when the Communist entered the city.

Words had always been his friends
and he used them
to celebrate his country's
unity and freedom.

But with the Viet Cong overrunning the city,
he felt his words now mocked him
and his life was a complete waste.

Her grandfather burned his books,
retreated into silence
and died a man broken by history.

Her grandmother told her
life is more than our memories
and Ms. Le's duty was
to remember his life,
for it taught them
that while history tried
to crush them
they endured.

Another piece of the puzzle
is Ms. Le's life as an immigrant.

She was four years old
when she,
along with her mother, sister, and grandmother,
left Viet Nam.

Her father had died earlier
when her mother was eighteen
leaving her with two small daughters
to raise.

Her mother's life distilled into one task ~
the escape of her family
to a new life in Australia.

It was inconceivable to her mother she would not succeed.

They spent five nights
on a boat on the China Sea.

The trip was a dangerous undertaking.

The adults knew the risk ~ pirates, violence, death.

Each carried a small bottle of poison
to be used if the situation warranted it.

Ms. Le's memories of that time are spotty.

She doesn't remember
the pirates who boarded the boat
but were bluffed by the bravado of the men
on board
or the engine dying and failing to start
for six hours.

She does remember the early dawn morning
when they slipped out to sea
aboard a boat disguised
as a fishing vessel,
and the bow of the boat,
the bow dipping into each wave,
and the bright lights of an oil rig
off the Eurasian coast
and the taste of her first apple
given to her by oil rig workers.

After three months in a refugee camp,
they settled in a working-class neighborhood

in Melbourne.
There was no sense of entitlement there.
That community was bound together
by the understanding
they all were starting again.
Her mother first worked on farms
and then on an auto assembly line
six days a week, double shifts.
Somehow, her mother learned English
and gained Information Technology qualifications.

Ms. Le says they were poor.
Every dollar was allocated
with extra tuition budgeted
for English and math,
regardless of what had to be left out.
The thing usually left out was new clothes.
Her mother bought second-hand.
Two pairs of stocking,
each to hide the holes in the other
and uniforms to the ankles,
because they had to last six years.
Occasionally, Ms. Le saw signs
that said, "Asians, go home."
She wondered,
"Go home to where?"
Yet, those signs served a useful purpose.
They caused something
to stiffen inside her
and gathered her resolve.

As Ms. Le moved through the educational system,
her mother moved up the employment ladder.
She opened a computer store.
later she studied to be a hairdresser
and opened another business.
Women came to her mother
to talk about husbands
who could not make the transition

and troubled children
caught between two worlds.

Ms. Le realized she was living
in parallel worlds.

In one world,
she was the classic Asian student
relentless in the demands
she made on herself.

In the other,
her life was enmeshed
in lives which were precarious,
tragically scarred by
drug abuse, violence, and isolation.

Another piece of the puzzle
was not planned for or sought out.

In her final year of law school,
Ms. Le was selected to be
Young Australian of the Year.

That honor recognized her social activism.
With it came many invitations to speak
in venues she had never heard of
and homes she never imagined.

She did not know how to act,
did not know the protocol,
or how to use cutlery,
or how to carry on a conversation.

She wanted to retreat into her former life.
To the routine and comfort of ending each day
as they had for almost twenty years
sharing the events of their day
with one another.

She told her mother she could not do it.
Her mother reminded Ms. Le
she was now exactly the same age
she had been when they boarded the boat
for Australia.

"No" had not been an option for her mother.
Her mother urged her

“to just do it
and not be something she wasn't.”
So, she did.
She spoke on youth unemployment and education
and the neglect
of the marginalized and disenfranchised .
Remarkably, the more candidly she spoke,
the more she was asked to speak.

Ms. Le met people
from all walks of life
and learned many things.

One thing she learned was
it's OK to be an outsider,
a recent arrival,
new on the scene.

Not only is it OK, but perhaps something
for which to be thankful,
a gift from the boat.

She says,
“Being an insider can
collapse your horizon
and cause you to accept
the presumption of your present.”

And she knows now the world does fall apart,
Yet, it is not something to fear,
for when it does,
it allows possibility,
implacable optimism,
and tremendous energy.

Ms. Le learned another thing about herself.
She discovered the law was not her calling.
So she followed her intuition.
She gathered a team around her.
They were penniless.
Each day she made a big pot of soup
for the evening meal.
They worked long into the night.

Most of their ideas were crazy.
A few were brilliant.
Later, Ms. Le again followed her intuition
and moved to San Francisco.
Today, she is CEO and founder
of Emotive Lifescience,
which developed a headset
that reads brain waves
and directs the functioning
of digital devices.

Ms. Le says
she has begun to think about
having children of her own,
and she wonders about the boat.

She asks herself,
“Who would ever wish it on their own?”

Yet, she fears privilege, ease, entitlement.

And she asks herself,
“Can I give them a bow in their lives
to lean bravely into each wave,
the unperturbed and steady beat
of the engine,
the vast horizon guaranteeing nothing?”

She knows if she could
and **still** see them safely through,
she would.

Being in the boat was a seminal moment,
a transfigurative moment,
for Ms. Lee.

It took her away from many things
she knew and loved
and cast her out
onto the uncertain,
sometimes chaotic seas of life.

It also taught her many things.
It taught her people can start again
and not only survive but thrive.
It taught her to value herself

by the content of her character
not by circumstances of her life.
It taught her to be courageous and strong
in the face of opposition.
It taught her to listen to her inner voice.
It taught her change and uncertainty
can promote possibility,
give rise to tremendous energy,
and challenge people to be more
than they thought possible.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday,
the day the church celebrates
the revelation of Jesus
to Peter, James and John.

Today we are invited
to join Jesus' friends on the mountaintop
and see Jesus arrayed in glory,
shining in and for the world.

As Peter said,

"It is good for us to be there with him."
Our presence with him there
strengthens and prepares us
for our journey through Lent
(which begins this Wednesday)
in much the same way
it prepared the disciples
for their journey
to the cross.

And like the disciples,
we cannot make our home on the mountain.
We, too, must make our way down the mountain.
We, too, must get into the boat of life.
Get into the boat
and sail across the uncharted,
and sometimes uncertain seas of life.
Oh, the places we will go.
Oh, the things we will see.

Some will give us great joy.

Some will break our hearts.

Some will challenge and tests us.

All will participate in our transfiguration,

transform us to be points of light

in our God's wondrous and wonderful world.

Oh, the places we will go;

Oh, the things we will see

when we leave the mountain

and sail the uncharted seas of life

with Jesus.

Amen.