

## “Transfigured in Tough Times”

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This is a hard passage and it is preached every year - to try and come up with something different - and I realized, like you, I have a hard time trying to come to terms with what it means to be transfigured. So I decided I wanted to look for someone that I could give you as an example and show you clearly how this person's life was transfigured – transformed – and then by putting ourselves in that person's shoes, we can begin to learn how our lives have been touched by the Holy Spirit. How we have been transformed, even transfigured, by the power of the living God.

The person I would like to talk about today is somebody most of you probably haven't heard of unless you are Dutch, like Dale [DeWild] over here. (I don't know why I'm on this Dutch kick the last few weeks. [Laughter] It's all Kris' fault.)

This gentleman's name is A. J. Muste. Muste is someone who is so well thought of by those who know him and heard of him, and related to him. I would like to make him real and relevant for all of you. Noam Chomsky, who was very famous as a philosopher of cognitive science and a political critic, said that A.J. Muste was one of the most important figures in American history, and it is a shame people do not know more about him. So, it is my task to share more about his life with you but, even more importantly than his *life*, I want to show you how God transfigured and transformed him throughout his life, so that we can learn from him and learn how God is working in ours [lives].

A.J. Muste was born in the Netherlands, on January 8, 1885, and he is still relevant today. As a small boy, he became an immigrant and came to Michigan. And, as an adult, A. J. would define himself by the biblical figure who he was named after - A. J. was named after Abraham. He [Muste] said Abraham had to leave his native land, Ur of the Chaldean, in obedience to the command of God. The fidelity of the patriarch Abraham became the path willed by God for A. J. Muste's life. He, too, as an immigrant would have to learn how to share his faith in a land he did not know, but would make his own. The movement of the people in space and time, according to Muste, modeled God's design; which is not static, but instead draws us ever onward toward the goal of establishing a society of peace and justice. Peace and justice for Muste was the very definition of what the Bible is and, just like A. J. grabbed Abraham and made him his own, each one of us should take these biblical characters and make them our own as well.

The experience of his being an immigrant characterized, he said, our American identity and becomes a symbol of obedience to God's will: that's what being an immigrant is. Muste was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church. When he was 13 years old, he had gone to church on Good Friday and he went back on Easter Sunday, because church in the Dutch Reformed tradition was not an option - it was a mandate - and you are to be there. In fact, Kris even gave me mints by Queen Wilhelmina. I'm not giving them to you because when kids in the Dutch Reformed Church had their mint, they always received it at the beginning of the sermon, and they would sit still because they knew by the time they sucked it until it was gone, the sermon would be gone [over] as well. Either I serve Presbyterian gob-

stoppers [laughter] or you're not getting anything, because I want *my* sermons to be the time *I* want them to be. [Laughter]

But in the Dutch Reformed Church he went to church on Friday, then back on Sunday and, all of a sudden, after Easter service he walked outside the door and, as a 13-year-old, the sun hit him on that Michigan morning, so pronounced - after the long, dark winter - and he said, "God is risen indeed."

"From that moment on," he said, "I believed, not just what people told me, but I felt it in my heart - in my very soul. And, from that day on," he said, "for the rest of my life, God was real to me."

That didn't mean that God didn't change (and we will get into that), but God was real to him from that moment on.

When was God real for you? Not just something your parents made you do. Not just something you felt was appropriate to go and do, to spend your time once a week. When was God *real* to you?

As an adult, the mystical experience like he [Muste] felt as a 13-year-old would confirm A. J.'s faith during periods of doubt, when traditional doctrine and disappointment in Christianity shook him; the mystical experience of that 13-year-old day and others after that would transform and, I even say, transfigure the rest of his life.

He attended Hope College Preparatory School in Holland, Michigan, and like all good little Dutch boys in Michigan he went on to Hope College (just like Dale). After graduation, A.J. took a year off to teach Greek and English in a classical academy, and like all good Dutch people from Michigan, he went to Iowa where he taught at Orange City, at what later would be called Northwestern College. It was there he met his wife Anna Huizinga and they were engaged, but they didn't marry for a few years until he finished his education. They had a wonderful marriage that lasted for many years, until she passed away.

In 1906, Muste enrolled at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, a good Dutch Seminary in New Jersey. He also took classes while he was there at New York University and at Columbia University. It was after graduation that he took his first pastorate at First Washington Collegiate Church in New York City. He continued to take courses at Union Theological Seminary in New York. This is where he had his next transfigured moment in his life. He was raised a Republican, but during that time, he witnessed the sweat shops in New York City that were at work taking children and using them, and abusing them to crank out a product that would make a few rich.

Then he heard about the Triangle Fire and, if you know your history, you know about the Triangle Fire in the garment factory, which marked the founding of the garment trade unions. And, A.J. Muste knew that he could not keep silent when people were being abused, because he knew that Jesus would not keep silent when children and others were being abused.

That became another transfigureable moment in his life. It was at that point he claimed that he read the prophets, and the prophets really came alive for him. They were not just

spouting doctrine; they were talking politics - about what happened in their world. He said, "I need to start practicing politics to help the poor, to help children, to help those who could not help themselves."

So the political implication had him seriously at odds with his ministry. The Dutch Reformed Church didn't want to hear about politics. They wanted souls saved. They were not sure they wanted people on earth [to be] transformed. So he was deeply troubled and he went, in a moment of crisis of faith, to a retreat center in the Catskills. There he reflected on what God was calling him to do and he needed a rest because he was exhausted. In that place he had another mystical experience that transfigured his life. He was reassured that God's existence was true, and that God's love abounds; that he could be God's representative to this world, and care for people in a more meaningful way than [to] simply [provide] a handout - but a way to change and transform their lives - the way God had transformed his.

So he started going to a pastorate again, and he went to Newtonville, Massachusetts. His doubt was gone. He was preaching and involved in civil action. He felt like his life was truly meaningful.

Then the world intervened with the outbreak of World War 1, and Muste developed an unexpected conflict over his position as it related to war. He alternated between supporting the war and being a pacifist; and Muste, with his biblical principles behind him, had a conversion to pacifism. He believed that Jesus must have been a pacifist, so he thought about what that meant for him.

A. J. concluded that he could not bend the Sermon on the Mount and the whole concept of the cross and suffering love to accommodate participation in the war. "So," he thought to himself, "what does all of this mean?" God could have taken those who were about to kill Jesus, wiped them out and destroyed both the Jews who were upset with Jesus and the Roman authorities, who had power to act. He could have destroyed them all, but he didn't. Jesus, in an act of non-violence - as a pacifist - instead hung on the cross and gave his life without fight.

So for A. J. Muste, he thought there must not be any other way as well. He had to follow the same route, to be willing to suffer and even die without fight, because if the Holy Spirit could transform this world through the pacifist response of Jesus, maybe the world could be saved in the same way through others - like himself.

So, he continued. He started sharing and praying. He wanted to find other people like him, so he organized a group. They just called themselves "Comradeship" - they wanted comradeship. They organized a group around the principles of Jesus Christ. They started learning the way of truth and non-violence, and love is the way they put it. They shared meditation and prayer, and they said that prayer was a preparation for action.

All of a sudden, God again transformed or transfigured A.J.'s life. He went from being a pastor to being involved in all of these activities and, at the age of 34, A.J. found himself leading a force of 30,000 strikers in 20 different countries. A.J. was beaten and thrown in jail. He and the strikers faced down machine guns, but they would not fight back. Non-violence was their only tool - and they won. They formed the American Workers Party;

and, again, he started falling further and further away from his faith when he started getting all wrapped up in these activities.

Three years after that event, he and his wife took a trip to meet Leon Trotsky in Norway. While he was there, they then went on a vacation in Switzerland and Paris. He and his wife were just going around vacationing in Paris and they walked into a church. A.J. was floored. He sat down in the pew - it was a Catholic Church - and at first he couldn't warm up to it, because there were all of those statues that he just didn't [like]. (You know Dutch people just don't want that stuff in their churches. Presbyterians and Reformed people like it pretty barren.) Then, all of a sudden, he felt the Spirit of God and he was transfigured again. He realized that this was where he belonged - inside the Church. Everything he did, whether there were disagreements or not, had to come inside the Church. He walked out of that church transformed, committed again to the Church and also to his non-violence.

Then he started reading Gandhi. It was the advent of WW11, and he decided to devote his entire energy to the cause of pacifism. He believed that God burned unceasingly with compassion for the oppressed, and God cared through nonviolent means. Muste believed in nonviolent suffering, and he said, "Like Christ, all of us have to be willing to give until it hurts, even if it means we are crucified in our own way." Muste warned President Roosevelt in 1943 that mass murder was taking place all over Eastern Europe and Poland and even in Germany, and he never got a response. Then the concentration camps were opened, and millions and millions had died.

He spoke out against the atomic and hydrogen bombs. He became a huge proponent in opposition to the Vietnam War and, in the last stage of Muste's life, he was influential in the Civil Rights Movement. He guided Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in how to lead a resistance in nonviolence. Dr. King said that A.J. Muste was a big reason why he could fight off his own people when they wanted to be violent, by quoting the words of this Dutch Reformed pastor from Holland, Michigan, and the Netherlands - and it transformed the Civil Rights Movement, as it transformed Martin Luther King Jr.

At his funeral A.J. Muste had an overwhelming response from the most unlikely people in the same place: Ho Chi Minh, Robert Kennedy, Erich Fromm, Doris Day and peace organizers from just about every country and continent in the world, wrote letters, were there or spoke. He had an exceptional life. I couldn't give you all of the examples, but there were at least 8 to 10 times in his life where God transformed him - transfigured him into a different part of who he became; and, almost every one those times it was at a moment of crisis.

I'm not saying you need to be a pacifist, I'm not saying you need to be him. But what I liked about that story of A.J. Muste's life, was that he was so real in admitting those moments of great despair and worry. He always found hope and help, and you and I can as well. We have to think about why we believe what we believe. We have to argue with ourselves about it and be willing to be changed. We can get so set in our ways that we can't see anything else, but the way we wear our blinders. It is at those moments that God jumps in and says, "Not that way, not this time."

That's at least how he handled it with A.J. Muste, and I pray that he will do the same thing for you and me. In those moments when we are lost or frustrated, or can't believe what is

going on, I pray that we will be transformed and transfigured the way Jesus was, to find a new direction that makes a difference in our lives.

I believe it in my heart. The Holy Spirit still lives and I believe that God is still here. The Spirit still moves and we, not only can, but will be transfigured in that image.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we celebrate this day. Amen