

Transfiguration A 19 Feb 2023
Matthew 17:1-9
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

We here from our namesake, St Peter this morning, Saints: *'Lord, it is good for us to be here.'* Let's pray: . . .

One of my favourite pictures is one that I keep in my wallet. It's a photograph of our family when Emily and Adam were small children and the occasion is Christmas present unwrapping time at Grandma and Poppy's house. The snapshot captures a moment of sheer joy. There's nothing else. Everything is held in that moment. Yet, it's more than just a family photo. We're a part of something much bigger than ourselves. There's more going on than what physical eyes can see or understand. We're embroiled in a mystery that can neither be defined nor discussed, only experienced.

Everyone's life contains moments like that. A couple getting married gazing at each other see more than just another person. They've been brought face to face with the mystery of love. Think about the day you laid your eyes for the very first time on your child, grandchild, or great grandchild. You saw more than a baby. You were face to face with the mystery of life. A little child who squeals and quivers with excitement partakes of something deeper. That child comes face to face with the mystery of deep joy. Think about a time when you made a confession, and experienced the forgiveness of God or another person. It was about much more than words and remembering the burden you carried. You came face to face with the mystery of grace amidst brokenness. I've spent times in ICU with families as they've waited and watched for their loved ones to take their last breath. But they witnessed much more than death. That moment was spent face to face with the mystery of the gospel as their loved one was raised up and carried into new life.

These are the moments of transfiguration. Each one of them distinct, unique, unrepeatable. Yet, there's something about them that's oddly the same. Some thread that connects each experience. They glow with the light of God's presence. They're moments of pure grace. We can't make them happen. We can only be caught in the moment when it does. In that moment everything around us seems to fall away. There are no distractions. It's a moment of complete presence, attention, and union. Ultimately, it's a moment when we come face to face with God. That's when we could truthfully say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. . . We have eyes only for you."

There's nothing else to be seen. We're caught up in a moment where the entire world and all of life is held in suspended animation. Nothing else matters; not because everything else is excluded or unimportant, but because everything belongs. Everything is included in that moment. Nothing is lost or left out. It's a moment of union with God. We experience the union of heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, spirit and matter, time and eternity.

That's what happened to Peter, James, and John on the mountain in today's gospel. They "looked up and saw Jesus himself alone." They didn't see Moses or Elijah, each other, the cloud, or the mountain. Everything and everyone present, were contained in Jesus himself alone. This was a moment in which they experienced the transfiguration of their own lives in the presence of Jesus. They didn't just see the light they became the light; humanity illumined with and by divinity.

Saints, Jesus didn't become something he wasn't before that night on the mountain. He was always filled with the glory of God, radiating the divine light. Jesus didn't change and become something new but the disciples did. Their sight was healed, their vision corrected, their blindness removed. They saw the world transfigured, capable of revealing the beauty of God's holiness. They experienced all of life and creation as sacramental.

Many, maybe all of you, have been blessed and encouraged by experiences of transfiguration; some you may think insignificant, others grand and life-changing. You may remember what it was like and smile as you replay it in your mind. I remember one such transfigured moment in my life vividly. I experienced a Revelation [21:3,4] moment while I was kneeling at the altar praying the General Church Prayer:

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

Pain will be no more. I have suffered with chronic pain from the age of 17, but in that moment, I was acutely aware that I was pain free. I experienced weightlessness as though I was floating in space, and there was an energy buzzing through me. I had no awareness of Jesus’ bodily presence, but felt the warmth and wonder of divine light and love. I finished praying, stood up, and turned toward the congregation and paused for a few seconds to gauge whether anyone had shared the moment. Maybe they had; maybe they hadn’t.

I didn’t share this to draw attention to any quality within myself; rather, to highlight that God permits us to experience momentary glimpses of life and the world as he sees and intends it. And when bathed in God’s light and love, it’s impossible not to say, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. . . We have eyes only for you.”

Every time we experience a transfiguring event our vision is healed and we see in a new and different way. We see with God’s eyes. Transfiguration is not so much about what we see but how we see. It’s the difference between seeing with physical eyes and seeing with transfigured eyes.

As long as we see only with physical eyes, we'll always be looking for love, bored with life, bereft of joy, bound by guilt, and in fear of death.

Will we continue to live as if what we see is all we get, or will we let our seeing bring us face to face with the Mystery? Transfigured eyes don't deny or ignore the circumstances of our life or world. Jesus didn't. Rather, transfigured eyes reveal that in the midst of and sometimes despite those circumstances there's nothing but God, there's only God; there's nothing but life, there's only life; there's nothing but love, there's only love; and there's nothing but light, there's only light.

This deeper, transfigured vision, is what allows us to face up and respond to whatever life and the world throw at us. It's why we can get up and not be afraid. It's the source of our thanksgiving. This transfigured vision sustained the disciples through Jesus' crucifixion and to his resurrection. Perhaps that's why the Church asks us to hear the transfiguration story every year on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It's the beginning of our Lenten preparation. It functions as the hinge between the Season of Epiphany and the Season of Lent. Throughout the Season of Epiphany God has turned his face towards humanity. Lent is the season when we learn anew to turn our face toward God, that we might look up and see Jesus himself alone everywhere we look.

Lord, it is indeed good for us to be here: to experience your presence with us; to hear you speak your promise of forgiveness and salvation through holy scripture; to feel your comforting touch as your lips meet ours in holy communion; to know your love for us, and to be reassured that you will sustain us to life everlasting.

Listen to Jesus, Saints, and here he saying to you, "Get up and do not be afraid." Look up, Saints, and see no one except Jesus only. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.