

Shining Like the Sun

Mark 9:2-9

The Last Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 11) 2024

Transfiguration Sunday

Kyle Childress

In 1841 Ludwig Feuerbach wrote in *The Essence of Christianity* that God is nothing more than a projection of the idealized human being.

Seventy years later Sigmund Freud concluded from his psychoanalysis that “at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father,” the infantile projection of the human need for protection, who succeeds only in generating guilt and anxiety in believers.

Theologian Karl Barth came along roughly twenty years after that. After witnessing all his former teachers wholeheartedly supporting Germany’s entrance into World War I, because they believed that God was represented by the best of German people and culture, and by the person of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Barth spoke clearly and candidly saying, “One cannot speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice.” He went on to say that God is known solely through God’s self. We do not come up with God on our own. Instead, what we know of God is because God has chosen to reveal God’s self to us, most clearly and supremely in Jesus Christ.

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John, the disciples’ inner circle, up on a mountain. And there Jesus is Transfigured – his face, his body, his clothes suddenly shine like sun, not because of some reflection, but by some inner light shining forth from who he is. Jesus, the Christ, the Light

that is the source of all other lights, the Word made flesh that begat all other words. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End.

For one brief, bright shining moment, these three disciples first begin to see that Jesus is more than humanity spoken in loud voice.

And if that was not enough, suddenly Moses and Elijah show up and start having a conversation with Jesus. Moses – the great lawgiver and Elijah – the greatest prophet in conversation with Jesus. Peter nervously interrupts, butts in, and says, “Lord, this is great. Let’s do something. Maybe build some sort of shelter so we can stay awhile – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

As an answer, a massive bright cloud overshadows everything and everyone, and from within the cloud a voice says, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!”

With that answer, all three disciples fall to the ground overcome with fear. Jesus comes over to them, touches them and gently says, “Get up. Don’t be afraid.” And when they look up everyone is gone and everything is normal looking.

What have we gotten into with this Jesus? We thought he was just a nice spiritual person, perhaps a prophet, who was going to reform things. Or we thought he was the apex of our culture, the best of who we are. Some of us thought that maybe he was a kind of American superhero here to make America great again. At least that’s what we thought.

All of a sudden, we realize that he is more. He’s more than we bargained for. He’s more than we signed up for. And he is more than we could have imagined. At this point we don’t know all of who he is – the cross is still to come – but we already know he’s not our projection. He is coming to us outside of who and what

we thought and showing us something of the Living God. In the flesh. He comes to judge us. He comes to love us. And he comes to transform us.

And the voice from within the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!

But there is still more. When the disciples fall to the ground in fear, Jesus touches them and tells them not to be afraid. Here, in a moment, in a microcosm is the work of Christ. The One from Heaven revealed in transfiguration, shining with the light of God, is also incarnate – flesh and blood. He reaches out and touches; heaven and earth are joined and in so doing are made bright and shining and transformed.

To use the language of poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, we learn to see that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Here at the Transfiguration, the disciples’ minds, their ability to imagine begins to be transformed, so they are able to see the grandeur of God.

I’m always amazed at those rare moments when I am a witness to someone having their minds transformed so they catch a glimpse of the grandeur of God. Sometimes it is profound and overwhelming, humbling, and some of these experiences have taught me to read the Transfiguration story and whisper, “Yes, I’m beginning to understand.”

Recently, I read of the experience of Rev. Greg Knox Jones and his family called around the bedside of his wife’s elderly mother. She was dying and did not

have much time. The mother was lying in bed, surrounded by a nurse and two aides monitoring her. Over the next few minutes, they felt that she went to the very brink of death, peered through to the other side of existence, and then returned. Her son-in-law later wrote, “Her face was unlike anything we have ever seen. We fumbled for words to describe it, although nothing adequately portrays what we witnessed. The words ‘glowing’ and ‘radiant’ come close, but still seem lacking. Her face had taken on a different color. It was not ghostly or pale, but rather bright and beaming. It was not yellow or jaundiced, but more of a white gold, and her eyes sparkled with intensity.”

“She was looking up and away from us and appeared to be focused not on the ceiling, but beyond it. She began calling out names of numerous family members and friends, all of whom were deceased.”

He continued, “Initially, we thought she was telling us who she was looking forward to seeing once she died, which appeared to be any moment. But soon, we had the distinct feeling she was not naming the people she hoped to see, but actually seeing the people at that moment. As she called out each name her smile spread and she became increasingly excited; at times almost laughing. We lost all sense of time, but throughout this intense experience, our hearts were pounding as we anticipated that any moment she would breathe her last. However, it did not come, and after several minutes her appearance gradually returned to normal.”

He said, “I cannot say with certainty what occurred that night. The nurse and the two aids were dumbfounded and visually shaken. Yet, each of us who were present knew that something exceptional took place. Was my mother-in-law having a hallucination or did she really see her loved ones?”

He went on to say that though his mother-in-law lived only three days after that event, everyone noticed a change in her. She maintained a smile and was very much at peace. She showed no signs of fear or apprehension about death. He said, “Not only had it been a powerful moment for us, but it had a tremendous impact on her.”

Was this one of those moments when heaven and earth are joined?

Most of us have had moments difficult to explain that overwhelm us. Often, it has to do with the arts. Perhaps a piece of music struck chords deep within us affecting us in ways that words simply cannot express.

Perhaps we were in nature. Maybe we stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon and were overwhelmed with awe at the grandeur of God’s creation. Or sat quietly at the base of a great tree and simply listened to the sounds of the forest around us. Or we might have served food to a hungry person at HOPE or sat down and chatted with someone who was homeless, and our heart ached when we heard his story and our vision cleared long enough to glimpse that he was not really some stranger, or some con man, but rather our brother. Maybe we have looked deeply into the eyes of a newborn baby and have been so filled with love and were so connected in soul that we could not hold back tears of joy.

I believe these are moments when heaven and earth are joined and our imaginations are transformed and we begin to see differently. I believe these are moments when God is showing us glimpses of the New Creation in Christ, the grandeur of God.

Every Sunday we gather together in Christ’s name to worship the Living God. As Paul says, we “offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable

to God, which is our spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). And every time we do this, we are refusing to be conformed to this world. We refuse to commodify everything and everyone. We refuse to exploit and abuse God’s creation. We refuse the political fearmongering that says we are being invaded by drug dealers and cartels and criminals and we refuse to live by fear and refuse to respond with hatred and violence. Instead, our minds are being transformed by Christ, and we see children of God, we see human beings made in the image of God who are in need of hospitality and kindness and love.

Stephen Reeves of Fellowship Southwest, with whom we work, wrote this week, “The current state of our border is unsustainable. No one thinks that waves of asylum seekers making a dangerous trek to our border is the best scenario for anyone. We need a secure border, but we also need a humane border.” Part of what Stephen says is our world is changing. Due to climate change and political change, we are in the midst of global migration. Our job, our calling is to learn to be resilient and imaginative and caring.

The hate-filled fearmongering is deforming our minds and shriveling our hearts. Refuse and resist. Instead, root yourselves in the Living Christ, the Transfigured Christ, who transforms our imagination and expands our hearts. Get out and have a cup of coffee with a sister or a brother or share dinner a group of friends who help you hope, and who encourage you to see the light. You’ve got to get out and be with people who share the transfiguring light.

Every Sunday we’re here going through detox from the poisonous hatred spewed at us all week. Here our minds and hearts are being transformed, transfigured so we see differently. We show up again and again to practice no longer seeing from a human point of view but learning to see in and through the

Living Transfigured Christ. That's what we'll be doing every Wednesday night during Lent beginning this Ash Wednesday.

George Buttrick, one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century, told a story about a small congregation in New York City with a stained-glass window that they had gotten out of a supply house catalogue. It was a stained-glass window depicting the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, and there it was in all its gaudiness. Streaks of gold, aquamarine rivers of life, emeralds and pearls, angels floating around, and the congregation hated it. That wasn't the city they lived in. They didn't have streets of gold. They had streets of crime. They didn't have aquamarine rivers. They had the East River and the Hudson. They didn't have emeralds and pearls. They had tenements and squalor. It was too pious, too otherworld. But then, said Buttrick, over time, the colors in that window began to fade so that ever so slightly, you could see through it, the outline of the skyscrapers and tenements of the city of New York beyond. It was then, said Buttrick, that the window began to take on power, as God's city and their city. One city was the place of mission, the other the image of hope.

And over time, they began to see heaven and earth joined. The ordinary people on their streets infused with God's radiance. They saw in a different light.

For Jane and me, an important place that encouraged us to see in a different light is in downtown Louisville, Kentucky on the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammed Ali Blvd.). There is a city historical marker there telling of the extraordinary, transfiguring moment in the life of Thomas Merton, the great Catholic monk and writer, when he was walking in downtown Louisville, KY on an ordinary day in March 1958, at this exact busy intersection, and suddenly, heaven and earth merged for him. It was a turning point in his life.

He wrote, “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... We’re in the same world as everybody else; the world of the bomb, of race, hatred, the world of technology, mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. Yet so does everybody belong to God. And if only they could realize this, there’s no way of telling people that they’re walking around, shining like the sun.”

I’ll tell you what I think. God is not humanity said in a loud voice. If that’s all there is, then to hell with it. No, instead, I believe we human beings are God said in a small voice. More accurately, we see each other made in the image of God. As the voice in the cloud says, “These are my beloved children, listen to them, love them, and encourage them.” And we begin to see they all, we all have faces shining like the sun.

Tom Long, theologian and preacher writes that several years ago, the homeless shelter in his church was short of volunteers and put out the call to the congregation and he volunteered for a night in February. Tom remembered, “I knew I couldn’t do it by myself, so I asked an old friend of mine if he would help me out that night. He’s not a member of our congregation; he goes to another church, but he and I have been friends for years. And he’s a little bit embarrassed about having a minister as a friend. In fact, he will sometimes begin conversations, ‘Hey, I’m no theologian, but it seems to me that...’ Well, anyway, we arrived for our night in February. It was a bitterly cold night. We put peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cups of tea on a table, and when all was ready, we opened the door to the cold winter night, and in came several hundred folks, eager to find the

warmth of the place and some food and a place to sleep. When everybody had gotten their food, they made nests. We had no cots in those days, just cardboard pallets. They made nests to sleep on. And then I said to my friend when everybody was down, ‘One of us has to stay up all night. What shift do you want? Do you want the first shift or the second?’ And he said, ‘While these folks are still awake, I’d like to get to know them. I’d like to hear their stories. Let me take the first shift.’ I said, ‘Fine. I’m going to the staff room and get some sleep. You wake me up at about two o’clock in the morning.’ Two o’clock in the morning, he shook me awake. Even though the room was dark, I could feel excitement on his body. ‘What is it?’ I asked. ‘I’m no theologian,’ he said, ‘but I think Jesus Christ is out there.’”

This creation is infused with the light and life of God, and there are those moments when the curtain is drawn back, perhaps only for a moment so that we get a glimpse of reality in all its mystery, in all of its holiness and in all of its splendor.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.