

I don't know if anyone remembers, but last Sunday, we were living in a snowy, white world. Correct? This Sunday, we are living in a melty, messy world. Also correct? The world around us, in regards to weather and terrain, has been transfigured or transformed in just that week's time. And given that this is Transfiguration Sunday, don't think that I'm not grateful for the excellent example of transformation that nature has provided for us; I am! This is the Sunday of the church year when every preacher looks to find ways to flesh out the notion of change and transfiguration, and we have a pretty obvious instance of such all around us in nature.

Let's think a bit about this sacred festival of Transfiguration and its place within the whole of Epiphany, our current season of the church year. Epiphany is ushered in by the visit of the Magi to the Christ child, guided by a star. We celebrated that festival on January 5. Epiphany is both that particular event and also the season that follows that event. Epiphany is marked by God's glory, light and revelation, and our texts in the following Sundays revealed Who Jesus was and what He was about: we saw Jesus baptized in the Jordan, we saw Him turn water into wine, we saw Him preach at his home synagogue, we saw him work miracles and share teachings, and now we see Him transfigured on a mountain top on Transfiguration Sunday, the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany. So, our series of Sundays featuring glory, light and revelation are culminating in this mountain top experience. But, do you know when we will *next* encounter Christ on a mountain? It will be on Golgotha, the mountain called "The Skull", when we see Christ crucified on Good Friday. A stark contrast. Much as this Transfiguration Sunday is the culmination of glory, light and revelation, it is *also* the foreshadowing of *another* kind of revelation, one that takes place, literally in darkness; the crucifixion on the mount of Golgotha, when the sun refused to shine. Both these events reveal the glory of God, but in wildly different ways. And the question that has accompanied us through this season of Epiphany could well be framed: *where* do we see the glory of God? And *how* does that seeing shape us?

I invite you to think carefully about those questions. Think about the proportion of light and darkness, of joy and anguish, within your own life and within the world. Is God present *only* in the light and joy? Or is

God's glory revealed even in the darkness and the anguish? Only on the mountain tops-- *or* in the valleys as well? Where do we see the glory of God? And how does that seeing shape us?

Let's first consider these questions in conversation with St. Paul, who writes to us about God's power to transfigure and transform in his 2nd letter to the church at Corinth. If Paul was here with us now, we could probably have a pretty engaging conversation with him, because his words here are provocative and full of depth, don't you think? I love some of these verses and find them deeply inspiring, and I'd be delighted to tell Paul so. That first verse-- "Since then we have such a hope, we act with great boldness"---well put and thanks for that thought, St. Paul. I find that an encouraging word, a reminder that as people who at all times embrace the radical notion of resurrection, we *can* act boldly. In a world that often features desolation and death, Christians cling to life and renewal and are not paralyzed into hopelessness. Good to know! A few verses later are equally inspiring words: "The Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This, too, sounds like a word of grace, a reminder that God is ever present and ever looking not to *burden* us, but to *free* us. How easily we forget this and make our life of faith into yet one more obligation in a world of "shoulds". God doesn't look to add to our load of guilt and failures, to increase our pile of "should", but to free us from them. Eloquent and inspiring words, Paul, thanks for that also.

But, I might want to raise some questions with Paul about the verse that follows and maybe you would too. He wrote, " And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." Notice that Paul doesn't say you *will be* transformed or you *should be* transformed, but rather --"you *are* being transformed from one degree of glory to another." He states it as a present given reality. So, I, in response, would like to ask---*really*, Paul? I mean, is that *so*? Have *you* noticed lately that you are being transformed from one degree of glory to another? Would you be able to demonstrate this morning that you are a few degrees more glorious right now than you were last Sunday? Or a year ago? Or a decade ago? In all honesty, glory isn't a word I associate very frequently with myself at all. Do you with yourself? As you brushed your teeth this morning and glanced at the

mirror, did you think, “I am definitely a bit more glorious today than yesterday?” I surely didn’t! Not even close. Now presumably, Paul is speaking spiritually rather than physically, but even then, I’d be a little hard pressed to document any definitive increase in interior glory. I wouldn’t mind sharing some thoughts around that with Paul, if I could.

And furthermore, he then continues, “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” Again, I would want to say, “Really? “We do not lose heart?” You think not, Paul? Because I don’t think it’s all that difficult to lose heart, myself.” How about you? Do you get discouraged? I sometimes find it difficult to *not* be discouraged if I spend too much time immersing myself in the news of the day. Both nationally and internationally, I experience that our species is ridiculously self-destructive and prone to violence and greed. I might argue that the world can be a pretty dark and scary place, exactly the kind of place, I might tell St. Paul, where it is all *too easy* to lose heart.

And of course, the dark and scary parts of life aren’t all held at a distance in news about other places. Far from it. Some of it is up close and personal. We had numerous significant deaths in the past year. Several of us are fighting cancer. It seems like it’s been a tough winter for health and well being for many. Our culture seems more and more profane and unkind. It gets to be sad and scary, and I think we could make a sound argument that it’s actually pretty easy to lose heart. One wonders, actually, what Paul could have been thinking! Was his own life so protected and sheltered from hardship that he could make these unlikely claims? Hardly! He lived as a nomad, dealt with strained financial circumstances, imprisonments, ostracism, and health issues of his own. So, he *didn’t* write these words out of a false sense of ease. Let’s look again at the whole verse: “Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” Ah. So there it is. It’s the underlying *mercy of God*, the conviction that God calls us and is with us in this world, even our dark and scary places, that prevents us from losing heart. Paul’s finely tuned awareness of God’s presence and purpose apparently kept Paul from growing weary and discouraged. How, we might wonder, did Paul *hone* that awareness of God’s presence and purpose? How did he gain that spiritual resilience? Could we do so also?

Let's look to our Gospel lesson now for some further insights, as this lesson is the ultimate example of an encouraging transformational mountain top experience.

We sometimes speak of *mountain-top experiences*, events that were astounding in their positive impact upon us, and this Scriptural text is the origin of that idea. What's actually happening? Jesus and three of his closest friends go up the mountain and spend time in prayer. And Jesus, while in prayer, is transformed or transfigured before the disciple's very eyes. There is a lightness, whiteness, brightness to his face and clothing. Not only that, but Moses and Elijah, the two figures from the past of the Old Testament that most clearly represent the law and the prophets, appear beside Jesus and discuss his future crucifixion. I love this verse: "Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men with him." Such a human and endearing detail, isn't it? I totally relate to struggling to stay awake. If Phil and I find ourselves at the end of the day in our lower level family room, snuggling under a throw watching TV with the gas stove in the corner providing flame and warmth, I am in a continual struggle to stay awake. I keep nodding off at crucial moments, missing important scenes, even as I try to keep my eyes open. It may well be evening in our lesson by the time we read of the disciple's fatigue, and remember that they started their day by climbing a mountain; they are having a hard time remaining awake. Which could well remind us of another passage in Scripture set in the evening when Jesus takes these same three with him, for a time of prayer, and they again have trouble staying awake. That would be in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night of Maundy Thursday, and it's a surprisingly similar scene to this one. Except that Garden event is a dark and somber scene rather than the bright and glorious scene we have before us this morning on the mountaintop. The fact is, though, that the glory of God will be revealed in the Garden of anguish, too, just as it is on the mountain top of revelation. This is *another* way in which this Epiphany text points us towards Lent and Holy Week to come.

Fortunately, the sleepy disciples do manage to stay awake, and they are rewarded with this glimpse of glory, of dazzling light, of a vision of these two absolutely venerated Old Testament figures with their Lord. Well worth fighting off sleep for, we would imagine! As Moses and Elijah take their leave, Peter jibbers about

the possibility of setting up a permanent camp there, so that everyone involved can stay a while. But that moment of glory is not a lasting moment; it *cannot* be housed and sustained because of its very nature. Instead, a cloud comes and overshadows them, terrifying the three disciples. The voice of God is heard in the midst of this cloud: “This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And then it’s all gone: no light, no cloud, no Moses or Elijah, no voice. Just Jesus and these three, who keep silent about this remarkable experience as they return down the mountain.

This is such a rich text with so many intriguing facets. Here’s one which I find worth exploring a little further: the disciples experience the glory of God in both light *and* shadow even on this mountain top. Right? They *see* God’s *glory* in the dazzling light of Christ in prayer and the vision of Moses and Elijah. But, they *hear* God’s *voice* from within a cloud that overshadows and terrifies them. It’s not all sunshine even on that mountain top. And God isn’t present *only* in the dazzling light, but in the shadow of that cloud. Which might tell us what? Perhaps that the Holy God is revealed not only in that which enlightens and dazzles us, but *also* in that which may mystify or alarm us. And also that this holiness of God is revealed not *only* in the bright sunshine of mountain tops, but in the dark shadows and clouds, whether on mountain tops or in valleys, too. So, don’t assume that you’re not experiencing God’s holiness or revelation if you happen to feel mystified, lost, or in darkness; the holiness and revelation of God is by no means *confined* to moments of dazzling sunshine *alone*. Even *on* the mountain top, God is present in cloud and shadow.

Which brings us back to the question of the season of Epiphany: Where do we see the glory of God? And how does that seeing shape us? Where have *you* most recently seen the glory of God? It could be a moment in nature, in worship, in family, or in private. It could be a happy moment or a sad moment. It could be a time of brightness and clarity, or it could be a time of mystery, even darkness. An instance that comes to mind for me happened after the death of my good friend and colleague, Pastor Greg Garmer, who died ice skating on the St. Louis River in early December. I struggled with the manner of his death, a struggle that continued throughout most of the beautiful service held for him several weeks later at First Lutheran in Duluth.

But what mattered most to me in that service was a moment at the end of the service when the Pastor leading the service traditionally stands at the coffin or urn and does a pray of commendation for that soul into God's hands. At this service, our Bishop was presiding and she very wisely invited all the clergy present to come forward for this prayer of commendation. We gathered around the urn, our hands on each other's shoulders or on the urn and prayed for our friend's soul to be safe and blest in the hands of God. *That* was the transformative moment of light and revelation for me in the midst of grief and darkness; that sense of a loving community of saints on this side of the grave and the next, that trust in God's mercy. You have similar stories also, when you have, somehow, been aware of God's presence or glory. Maybe in surprising ways. Maybe in times of gladness or sadness. But those moments *are* there, because *God is* there, and it's worth thinking about those moments and discovering what we learn from them. Where *do* we see the glory of God? And *how* does that seeing shape us and transform us? We may not be able to measure our degrees of glorious transfiguration, but yet--we *do* grow; we *do* learn; we *do* become more Christ-like through the difficult and joyful times of our faith journey. Whether it is as obvious as snowfall and snowmelt, transformation and transfiguration are happening; and God is in the mix, nudging, encouraging, giving us glimpses of glory or insights that change us, in times of sunlight or cloud. As this season of Epiphany ends, may we grow in our capacity to see God's glory and to find ways to share it that bless the world. Amen.