

Sermon - Last Sunday of the Epiphany
Transfiguration
2/11/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I first moved back to Wisconsin in late March of last year, I had never seen the northern lights before. I'd seen photographs of the northern lights. I'd been to places where allegedly the northern lights were known to appear. But I had never had the experience of witnessing them myself. One frigid night toward the end of the month, reports came in on our phones and from our friends: tonight was an Aurora night – the conditions were just right to see it. The clouds had settled and the positioning of the earth beneath the sky was such that I was closer to this meteorological phenomenon than I'd ever been.

And so my husband and I bundled up and hopped in the car and drove up to Newport Park, I unsure of what exactly we'd see. It was very cold. It was very dark. And then it was breathtaking.

I had never, in my entire life, seen anything like these northern lights before. They danced with one another against the breadth of the darkness, illuminating the pale, icy sand of the beach below. We sat on a crooked wooden bench, and I found myself laughing – literally laughing like a little kid – at the astonishing newness of this way to encounter the majesty of God's good, created world. I thought I knew how the sky worked – how light and color worked. I'd lived my life with a certain understanding of nature and physics. And then I saw something glorious.

Our Gospel today places us in this place of encounter with glory as Jesus is transfigured upon the mountain before the eyes of his bewildered disciples. He brings them up to the top of a deserted mountain to pray – Peter, James, and John. They thought they knew how mountains worked. They thought they knew what prayer was supposed to be. They thought they knew who

Jesus was. They'd lived their lives with a certain understanding of faithfulness and discipleship. And then they saw something *glorious*.

When we pause in this moment on the mountain, we find ourselves within the entirety of the Bible unfolding upon this mountaintop. All of it – from the Old Testament to the New – is right here within this cloud of glory. Alongside Jesus appear Moses and Elijah. Moses was the one to whom God gave the Law that would unite and define the people of Israel. Moses was the one by whom God would affirm the covenant between heaven and earth. Moses was the one who let Israel out of Egypt, across the parted Red Sea, and into freedom. Moses was the one to whom God promised: I love you, I will set you free, and I will be with you, always.

When Israel forgot this love, and when they believed themselves destined for something other than freedom, God sent them the prophets. He sent Elijah to call them to repentance and a renewed faithfulness– to call them home again and to gather the ones who had wandered away. The entirety of the Old Testament is a story of God making a covenant with his chosen people: I love you, I will set you free, and I will be with you, always.

When Jesus is born into this world as a fragile, human child, he is the fulfillment of the Law given to Moses. He is the assurance of the prophets, Elijah and all. He is the hinge upon which history turns – the center of everything, cosmically and here on the mountain.

From this moment on in the Gospels, Jesus will be making his way toward Jerusalem where he will be crucified. There is a reason why this Gospel is always the text we read together on the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. When we come down the side of the mountain, we accompany Jesus to nothing less than the Cross itself. And yet we see, too, a foretaste of the Resurrection in Jesus' clothes as they shine dazzling white.

Jesus knows that the journey down the mountainside will end in his death. But before the Cross, and before the tomb, he gives his disciples this glimpse of the fullness of the glory of God.

As the cloud descends, the voice of the Father calls from the heavens: “this is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” You thought you knew about mountains. You thought you knew about men. But you are about to witness something glorious. This is not just your teacher or even your friend. This man before you is the Son of God – the fulfillment of the law, the prophets, the covenant, and every love song you’ve ever heard. *This* is the one who will tell you absolutely everything you need to know about our almighty and living God. *Listen to him.*

This mountaintop transfiguration is God’s assurance that all of this is *real*. In fact it is so real, that after you have encountered it – even briefly, even through a cloud or a mirror darkly – after you have known the truth of who this man is, nothing will ever be the same. You have seen something glorious.

I imagine that if you took some time to climb up a mountain, or even a small hill, in silence to pray, or even just to be very still, you would remember your own glimpse of the glory of God. I don’t necessarily mean a cloud coming down from the sky or even the northern lights, but a moment in time where suddenly the darkness cleared, and the light poured in, and like the disciples, you saw only Jesus. Only Jesus in the first breath of a newborn child. Only Jesus in the touch of a hand that brought healing. Only Jesus in the first bright morning after a day that you thought would be your last. This, too, is transfiguration.

Today, Christ calls us to see the glory of God. He blesses us with assurance that there is a reality that sometimes we cannot fully see or touch, but it is holy, and it is the realest thing that we will ever know. We cannot stay up on the mountaintop – unfortunately for us, who like Peter, so often hope to stay in the midst of moments of glory. But we can receive this gift of assurance. We can receive the gift that God gives us in the full knowledge that *all of this is real*.

We thought we knew what love could do. But watch *this*.

