

2.27.22 (Transfiguration Sunday)

The Opening Collect for this Sunday reads, “O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.” This is Transfiguration Sunday, the final Sunday in the season of Epiphany, a season in which we catch glimpses of Christ’s hidden glory in the form of miracles, healings, and divine teaching. Finally, we read the clearest, and most revelatory event and capstone of this great season, in which we, along with Peter, John, and James, are given a momentary glimpse of the glory of God shining forth from the God in man made manifest, Jesus Christ, to strengthen those who follow Jesus on the way to the cross.

An unveiling of the hidden glory of God such as this one is classically referred to as a “theophany,” a visible, tangible manifestation of the glory of God. Two of the most notable theophanies in Scripture were experienced by the two men standing beside Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses asks to see God’s glory, and receives that request in part, as God passes him by, showing Moses only his back. As Elijah flees from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19, he is brought to Mount Horeb, where he hears God speak to him in a still small voice. It is no accident that these two great figures from Israel’s history with God are standing with Jesus, in the presence of the disciples. They speak for the Prophets and the Law in saying, “this is the one whose presence we knew before. We radiated the light of which he is the source.” Our Collect tells us something very helpful about theophanies, that they are granted to God’s people, as a merciful response to human need. The Transfiguration is given to the disciples because Jesus understands their weakness, and knows that they need to be strengthened by his glory.

The Transfiguration marks a decisive turning point in Luke's Gospel, as it does in our Christian year. The first nine chapters of Luke's Gospel center around Jesus' family, his early life, and his public ministry in Galilee. It is in chapter 9, immediately following this great moment of Transfiguration, when Jesus abruptly fixates on his death, so that every step he takes literally leads him closer to Jerusalem. The Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond Brown describes this shift in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospels in this way, "The time is coming for Jesus to be taken up, and so he sets his face for Jerusalem where he is to die." Our opening hymn captures this shift very nicely as well in its final verse after reflecting on the definitive notes of the Epiphany season "Manifest on mountain height, shining in resplendent light, where disciples filled with awe, thy transfigured glory saw. When from there thou leddest them, steadfast to Jerusalem, Cross and Easter day attest, God in man made manifest." Jesus no longer wanders through the Galilean wilderness praying, healing, and teaching, but sets his face towards his death in the great city of Jerusalem.

Knowing those who follow after him better than we could ever know ourselves, Jesus is aware that his disciples could never endure the suffering, humiliation, and confusion of what will happen on Good Friday without this momentary glimpse into the glory that awaits on the other side of it. It is the same wisdom in the church year that places the Transfiguration on the final Sunday before we begin the Lenten season. We need this glimpse into glory to give us the strength to endure the humiliation of the cross.

For as many times as I have heard the story of the Transfiguration on the last Sunday Epiphany, a question always plagues me when I do hear it. Why does God rebuke Peter for a request that, at least to me, seems reasonable and natural? "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Luke says Peter does

not understand what he said. God's response is to speak to Peter in the form of a terrifying cloud, saying "Listen to my Son!" God offers a strong, "no," in response to Peter's request. Clearly, Peter is wrong about something, but what has he gotten so wrong? It is really good to be in the presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in a moment where God reveals himself, right? Shouldn't we try to bottle and reproduce those kinds of experiences? Isn't that at least part of what being a Christian is about?

While our lectionary reading from Luke's gospel concludes before Jesus says it explicitly, Jesus' response to Peter, supported by the voice of the Father spoken in the cloud, is to say, "the problem with your request, Peter, is that I came here to die. I came here to die on the cross, and if I stay on this mountain with you, so that we revel in my glory, I cannot do what I have come to do. I must come down, I must go to Jerusalem, and I must die." Remember that it is Peter who pleads with Jesus to establish his reign and rule through more conventional means, and certainly not the cross, leading Jesus to ultimately say, "get behind me Satan." Here on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter receives a similar rebuke for the same reason. Jesus did not come to give a few disciples spiritual highs on a mountain, he came to die on the cross.

Again, I do not wish to give the impression that I stand in judgment of St. Peter, or the disciples, because I know that I would, and I do, respond in the same way. Peter's inclination is so natural, so sensible, and seen so many places in the church throughout history. Whether our inclination is towards charismatic worship in the church because we are moved by gripping experiences with the Holy Spirit; or whether God's glory is unhidden in moments of sweet contemplation at an Oxford Evensong service, we are prone to clinging to glory, and not to the cross. This is not to say that those moments of glory and the high points do not matter, or to

suggest that God is not really present in them, but to say that all of the Christian life must be interpreted and understood in light of the cross.

The natural inclination to chase spiritual highs divorced from the true substance of Christian faith is precisely the struggle that the Apostle Paul is addressing in his pastoral epistle to the church in Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 13. To answer your question, no, no one is getting married this morning. 1 Corinthians 13 was not actually written for weddings, though I am certain St. Paul would have no objection to it being read in that context. This is a letter of instruction to the Corinthian Church, a church that struggled mightily to live together in healthy ways. As a great Shepherd of Souls, Paul recognizes that weighing in on specific disputes dividing the Corinthian Church might be beneficial for a little while, but that their true health is dependent on absorbing deeper Christian principles, and allowing those principles to shape the life of that community. St. Paul says, if you do not love one another, no clever solutions that I come up with will ever matter.

St. Paul writes to a church that is filled with gifts, glory, and the power of the Holy Spirit, but lacking in something vital that is far more important than any of these glorious things, love. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, if I have faith to move mountains, if I give up my body to be burned; If I do any of these things apart from love, I am a noisy nuisance, nothing, and gain nothing.” Spiritual experiences divorced from the love of God are not at all Christian. Great spiritual highs in the church without love are nothing. Great sermons without love, teaching without love, celebration of the holy eucharist, charitable giving without love, music without love, are all meaningless.

Remember that for Christians love is not an abstraction. Love is well-defined, concretely defined, we can point to a man and moment that defines all love for us. Love is defined by the God-man Jesus Christ, and we know what love looks like because of the cross. This pastoral letter reserved most often for weddings connects with the Transfiguration because Peter and the Corinthian Christians make the same mistake: they neglect love. If Jesus were to borrow from St. Paul in responding to Peter's request, perhaps he would say this, "If I were to stay here and dwell in this glory with you and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and never come down to go up on another high place, it is a noisy spectacle that is nothing and gains nothing."

"Faith, hope, and love abide; but the greatest of these is love." The greatest of these is love. The greatest of these is love because God is love, and love is what Jesus Christ has come to do in his life, death, and resurrection. We will not need faith when we see Jesus face to face one day, and we will not need hope when the future we hope for is reached, but love will always remain. Love is what compels Jesus Christ down the mountain, to the holy city where he is crucified, down into death itself, and up again to the Father, carrying our brokenness with him all the way to redeem us. Jesus chooses to come down from the Mount of Transfiguration for us. Jesus chooses love for us, and this love alone can strengthen us "from glory to glory," as our collect says it. Of course, this sustenance is not only for getting us through Lent, but through all of the dark and difficult times of life, what we would call our own cross.

If you are like me, you probably spent the last few days constantly checking your phone, the television, or your computer for information about the tragic war that has begun on the European continent in Ukraine. What a stark reminder that we still live in the world of Scripture, a world where a few prideful, vain, ambitious people can cause incalculable suffering for many, many others, especially those who are weakest because they are very old or very young. Between

checking the reports about the war, I needed to prepare my sermon and start planning for Lent at St. Peter's. Through this experience of switching between thinking about the latest war and thinking about Jesus Christ, I became keenly aware of the staggering difference between the ways of the rulers and the reign of this world, and the reign and rule of Jesus Christ. What a remarkable difference.

If we are Christians, we believe that Jesus is God. And so we believe that the Mount of Transfiguration is a momentary glimpse of a fraction of the power that this man could call to himself, a fraction of the glory he is capable of producing. He could unleash suffering on his enemies that far eclipses the power of the most lethal atomic weapons ever tested by a global superpower. He could come and prove that he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, so you better not stand in his way. Jesus was and is free to do this, but today we remember that he came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. He came down, he healed and taught, he washed his disciples' feet, and he died for them on a cross after they abandoned him.

In this very moment on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus does not consider the glory of God as something to be grasped, but empties himself, taking the form of a slave. He comes down from the mountain, and his love for human beings who abandon and kill him compels him to a Roman torture device designed to humiliate slaves who stand in the way of the wishes of a global empire. What kind of man does this? What kind of King shows his rule and establishes himself as king this way? Only Jesus Christ does this. Words fail to express what a pleasure and what a gift it is to know Jesus Christ at times of war like this one. We simply have to rely on groans too deep for words, in thanksgiving for Jesus Christ.

Today is not only the Feast of the Transfiguration, it also happens to be a day of commemoration for the Poet-Priest George Herbert, which is entirely coincidental, but still very

meaningful for us. If you are not familiar with George Herbert, I would encourage you to get familiar with him. Herbert was a gifted Anglican Priest and Poet who only lived to the age of 40 during the late 1500's and early 1600's, but wrote some of the greatest prose and poetry the English language has ever known. He also wrote a great work about the art of being a Priest, called "The Priest to the Temple." If one day I came to the place where I believed that Anglicanism was not correct about the sacraments, the church, or anything else, I might still remain an Anglican simply because we have George Herbert.

On the intersection of his commemoration day and the feast of the Transfiguration, which is ultimately a feast in which we celebrate God's love that takes him from the spiritual heights of Transfiguration to the lowest depths of hell and humiliation, I wish to read a poem of Herbert's as I conclude. The poem is called "Redemption," it is not very long, and it tells the story of a tenant of a rich Lord who decides to go and ask to change the conditions of his lease, because the current arrangements are not working for him. He goes to meet the king where he lives, in heaven, but hears that he has left heaven to come to earth. So he looks for him in the highest places on earth where you would expect a King to live, on places like the mount of Transfiguration. He cannot find this rich Lord in high and lofty places, and as he staggers around confused, he hears a gang of thieves and murderers killing someone. He goes to find that the victim of this crowd is none other than the very Lord who he was looking to speak with in heaven. This Lord looks at him to tell him that the better arrangements he was looking for are granted to him, and then he dies.

"Having been tenant long to a rich Lord, not thriving, I resolved to be bold, and make a suit unto him, to afford a new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old. In heaven at his manor I him sought: They told me there, that he was lately gone About some land, which he had dearly

bought Long since on earth, to take possession. I straight returned, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts; In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts: At length I
heard a ragged noise and mirth of thieves and murderers: there I him espied, who straight, *your
suit is granted*, said, and died.”

Thanks be to God for our rich Lord who revealed himself on the Mount of
Transfiguration, who then did the far great thing, he came down from it. Amen.