

Transfiguration of Our Lord (b)
2 Kings 2:1-12 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 Mark 9:2-9
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
February 14, 2021 (Traditional)

What are we to make of the transfiguration of Jesus? All of the sudden those three disciples have this vision of Jesus shining bright in all his divine glory on the mountaintop. It's like, suddenly the top gets blown off the story for a second and we get to see Jesus for who he is—the 2nd person of the Trinity—full on. All the questions are answered, everything becomes clear for that brief moment. As a pastor I've never had a problem finding endless theological significance in the transfiguration. The trouble was always: how do you relate it to everyday life? It's so supernatural; there doesn't seem to be anything ordinary or everyday about it! But now when I think about it, I realize that....I've had a decent number of transfiguration experiences in my life. I'm betting all of us have. By transfiguration experiences, I mean those times when all the clouds of confusion or pain or struggle or anxiety or sadness—all those dark clouds—lift off, and you experience the love of God, the comfort of God, the peace of God, directly and clearly. I'm sure a lot of us have experienced those moments—like supernatural moments. Nothing can really explain them; they're just gifts from God. They're beautiful.

For me, over the years, a lot of those experiences have happened in nature. When I was little there was a particular tree I used to climb. I'd sit on a branch fifteen feet up, and look down into a ravine, and I'd go into what I can only describe as a religious trance. I sensed that connection, that sense of presence, where I just knew that God was good and loving, and that he cared about everything deeply...from the biggest mountain down to the smallest cell in every single leaf on the tree.

Or sitting on the deck of my parents' cabin up on the Mississippi River on pitch black nights, stargazing. My dad started me doing that. We would both lie there on our recliners, looking up. On a clear night the Milky Way became three-dimensional. I remember once: reaching my

hand up, and suddenly I see my arm—bones linked with ligaments and muscles and tendons and veins and skin—reaching up towards those distant stars. I remember being just staggered: how could any of this be possible? How can this even be happening—that a small creature needs to reach up to connect with that infinity? Just being conscious—being able to reflect on it all—this is all such an improbable miracle. And I could almost hear that Fatherly presence saying “exactly” with a smile, filling me with a sense of being completely loved.

Other times those transfiguration experiences happen at surprising times. Like when my mom died. I was in 5th grade. My dad came to get me at school, and told me the news on the playground. Next thing I remember: we were parked at the high school. Dad had gone in to get my brother, and I was alone in the back seat of the car. The whole world was coming off its axis—that’s what it felt like. Coming apart, spinning out of control. Mom was gone. But suddenly this deep calm came over me. It was like, I had hit the rock bottom of the world. And there—surprisingly there at the gate of hell I guess you could say—I experienced, directly, this all-embracing presence, stronger than anything else, deeper than any ocean. God was there. Without any words, he made it clear: “It wasn’t that I just gave your mother life for a while. I am *giving* her life right now. And I love you. And you are in my arms, too.” And funny thing...I had the same exact experience a couple days later when Pastor Dallman came over to our house and hugged me. What a gift those moments are...right? The clouds of the world, the struggles, the pain, the challenges, the worries, the sadness, the futility—it’s like the curtain parts, and God himself comes shining through.

Epiphany is all about God manifesting himself in this world—shining the light of a new creation into the brokenness. Today we come to the end of this season, and we see Jesus transfigured in glory and blazing light on the mountaintop. This explosion of light happens at the center of the gospel of Mark. It’s like, you can think of Jesus walking down a dark tunnel during those years of his ministry, and of course we know there’s an explosion of light at the END of the tunnel...the resurrection. But there’s a light *in the middle of the tunnel*, too...the

transfiguration, and it points ahead towards the victory at the end of the story. Only a few of his friends see Jesus' glory on the mountain top in the middle of the story. And that's a powerful lesson for us, God's people, right now. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have God's glory, his brightness, his power, right now in the middle of the story. We see God's glory in Jesus. Now, it's not blazing out like the sun for all to see. But we see the fullness of God in the face of Jesus, who hung on a cross for us. Now that resurrection light is shining within us. It's the vision and the assurance and the faith that the Holy Spirit gives us, through Jesus, lighting the way for us. We very rarely—probably—show God's light by performing big glorious headline miracles. More often, on a daily basis, we show that light in our acts of love for each other, when we pour ourselves out with confidence in love and in service towards other human beings.

One thing to seriously think about, too, today: when you think of those transfiguration experiences you've had—how have you known who is communicating to you? I wonder what I would have done with those experiences told you about, how I would have interpreted them, or where I would have imagined they came from, without my parents, my pastors, my Christian friends, the people of my hometown congregation—without those faithful people—telling me who that is, shining bright in the darkness for me. Without the church pointing me to the one true God, I would have been like young Samuel (remember a few weeks back), who didn't know who was talking to him. God is always trying to get through to us. He is always opening the curtains of death and darkness in this world to reveal his love and his beauty to everyone. But without a flesh and blood person who comes to us (as one of us) and opens the door for us, without Jesus, without his earthly representatives—our grandparents, our moms and dads, our Christian friends—guiding us now, those transfiguration experiences that we have are just nice moments. They're like candles that blow out in the darkness of sin and loss and death.

Jesus was born into the middle of it. He came to give us not just a moment of brightness, but his eternal light. It's because of Jesus and the people in my life who introduced me to him, that I

knew exactly who was there with me in the back of that car while the whole world was coming down in ruins. It wasn't just a feeling. I knew that that was the resurrection light of Jesus Christ in the middle of that dark tunnel of death, pointing me towards total victory at the end of the story. I knew who was going to walk with me every step of the way; who was going to nurture me, uphold me, and give me victory at the end of the story. Jesus' transfiguration is not a brief moment of light...it's a promise from God about our future.

When they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus told his friends not to tell anybody what they'd seen until after his mission was complete. In fact, you'll notice that after practically every miracle and act of divine power he performs in the gospels, Jesus tells people to keep quiet. And here's why. He's making it clear: you can witness miracle cures and healings, you can see the peaceful love of God in a beautiful sunset. You can see his immovable power at rest in a mountain. You can see his unending depths in the ocean, his incomprehensible vastness in the Milky Way. In all these things you can see his goodness. But we haven't seen anything until we've seen him on the cross, trading his life for ours. That's where we see the true face of that awesome power out there. In the death of Jesus, and in our baptismal death which joins us to him...that's where you and I meet God face to face. It's in that total sacrifice of love on the cross—the death of Jesus—that we find, not just a temporary peace, but constant forgiveness and renewal—a new life that we can live every day.

This week, we're entering the tunnel of the season of Lent. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. We're going to hear those words: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." But even as we admit that we are dust, we know what lies at the end of the tunnel: Resurrection. Every step of the way through Lent, let's praise God for the light we receive in the middle of the tunnel! How good it is, Lord, to be here! Even in our sufferings, we are united with Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior. The light of his transfiguration—his resurrection—comes to us through the living word of the scriptures, through our baptism, in the bread and wine, in our acts of love for each other and for strangers. And that's what you and I are really here for, after all. With our words

and deeds, we're here to shine Jesus' light in the tunnel. Our fellow believers, our family members, our coworkers, all the people with whom we come into contact along the way—let's pray that, in the darkness of this tunnel, they will see the light of his final victory shining in us.