

Transfiguration of Our Lord (b)
Exodus 34:29-35 2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2 Luke 9:28-36
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
February 27, 2022 (Traditional)

In today's gospel lesson, all of the sudden, three of the disciples get to see this vision of Jesus, shining bright in all his divine glory. It's like, suddenly the top literally gets blown off the story and we get a glimpse of who Jesus really is—the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity. There he is, like a stationary lightning bolt on the mountain. For the moment, all the questions about his true identity are answered. Everything becomes clear. So how do you relate this vision to everyday life? It's so supernatural; there's nothing ordinary about it!

But 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. Nothing can really explain those experiences; they're just gifts from God. They're beautiful.

For me personally, a lot of those experiences have happened in nature. For example, I remember sitting on the bank of the Mississippi River with my dad on a pitch black night. We were looking up at the stars. "Billions and billions" of 'em, as Carl Sagan would say. I mean, the Milky Way was truly 3-dimensional that night. And I remember reaching my hand up towards the stars. Suddenly I see my arm against the backdrop of those billions of worlds out there. I remember being just staggered: how could any of this be possible? That I'm here reaching up, trying to connect with that infinity? It's like the Psalm says: "What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?" I mean...just being conscious, being able to reflect on it all—this is all such an improbable miracle. And suddenly, even as I felt so small and insignificant, I was flooded with God's presence. I was deep in his arms, in his love, in his care.

Other times those transfiguration experiences happen at dark 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 went in to get my brother, and I was alone in the back seat of the car. The world was coming apart—that's how it felt. Spinning out of control. Mom was gone. But suddenly this deep calm came over me. It was like, I was at the 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. She lives in Christ. I am *giving* her life right now. And I love you. You are in my arms right now." And funny thing...I had a repeat of that 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 world into our brokenness. Today we come to the end of this season, and fittingly we see Jesus transfigured in glory and blazing light on the mountaintop. This explosion of light happens quite literally in the center of the books of Matthew Mark and Luke. 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 that 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. And you think of it: it's only the three disciples 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. It's not blazing out like the sun on the mountain top 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 quiet 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 through those experiences? I wonder what I would have done with those experiences I 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 wouldn't know who was trying to get through to me with those beautiful experiences. It's like, I would not have known the face behind the blazing light, I wouldn't have known the person behind the show of power. God is always trying to get through to *everybody*. 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 the darkness. He came to give us not just a moment of brightness, but his eternal light shining in the dark tunnel. 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 crashing 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 light from the future victory, shining permanently into our lives right now.

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. So in the gospels, it's like Jesus is telling us: sure, you're seeing some amazing miracles—flashes of God's divine power—right now, but you haven't seen anything yet. Just wait till you see what I do on the darkest day for you. Wait till you see me with the nails through my wrists for you.

This week, we're entering the tunnel of the season of Lent. This 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 Christ's victory shining in us.