

**The Last Sunday of Epiphany
The Transfiguration
February 27, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Every year, on this last Sunday of our Epiphany season ... the Sunday before Ash Wednesday ... we hear the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus from one of the synoptic Gospels. It is obviously the record of a mystical experience, and for many that is sufficient ... a testimony to the divine nature of Jesus. However, for me there is much more ... not just about Jesus, but about the lives that you and I live in this world today.

Two years ago on this Sunday we were just beginning to absorb the news that there was a new high contagious and deadly virus on the horizon ... COVID-19. Little did we know that within a couple of weeks the world would shut down in an attempt to contain its rapid spread. Two years later we are just coming out of that shutdown, only to be faced with Vladimir Putin's unprovoked assault on Ukraine and its people. We ... in the United States ... are safe for now. But this war of choice will have consequences that will affect all of us ... higher prices at the gas pump and in the supermarket, additional supply-chain issues (as if that weren't bad enough already), and a pervasive anxiety about what a power hungry autocrat might choose to do next.

So, I wonder what the extraordinary story of a mountaintop theophany with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah two thousand years ago can tell us about the world we face today. What does the Transfiguration have to do with a global health crisis, or a war halfway around the planet? Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transformed ... and with him two very prominent ancestors of their faith, Moses and Elijah. Was this just a vision that they saw ... an optical illusion ... the sun shining in such a way that that they were visually blinded to the reality and just thought they saw the scene as they later described? Does it make any difference? If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously what are we to do with this?

A little context may be helpful: Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, and most of the stories of his healing and preaching occur there. At some point Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and moved north and west to Trye and Sidon on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in what is now Syria. It was there that Jesus had his encounter with the Syro-Phonician woman with a daughter in need of healing.

Then, from Trye and Sidon, Jesus and his disciples traveled east and came to Caesarea Philippi which is at the base of Mount Tabor ... the mountain upon which this Transfiguration took place, and which also happens to be the location of the headwaters of the Jordan River. It was at Caesarea Philippi ... at the base of Mount Tabor ... that Jesus asked the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" It was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus commanded them to "Take up their cross and follow me." It was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus offered the paradox "For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life will save it." And it was also here, at Caesarea Philippi, that Jesus set his face south, and began his journey to Jerusalem ... and to his crucifixion. Then, eight days later, he trekked up the mountain behind Caesarea Philippi ... Mount Tabor ... and this Transfiguration took place. I find it interesting that all these events took place at the site of the headwaters of the Jordan River ... the river in which Jesus was baptized and first heard the words "You are my son, the beloved."

We began our Epiphany season with the Baptism of Jesus ... and the words "You are my son, the beloved." Now we end our Epiphany season on a mountaintop with the same words ... "You are my son, the beloved."

Over the centuries, this singular event in Jesus's life has accumulated many layers of theological meaning. The standard teaching is that the Transfiguration is important because it reveals Jesus' divine nature, confirms his son-ship, foreshadows his death, secures his place in the stream of Israel's history by putting him next to Moses and Elijah ... the Law and the Prophets ... and it prefigures his Resurrection.

However, after all these years of preaching about the Transfiguration I was struck by the second part of this reading ... the portion about the healing of the boy who possessed by a demon. This story is in all three of the synoptic gospels, but this is the only time that it is included in the reading on Transfiguration Sunday.

I read this part of the story in a way I had never read it before, and I will have to admit that reading it with new eyes was not a pleasant experience for me ... more like post-traumatic stress. Several years ago, Caren and I were in Wilmington, North Carolina for my nephew's wedding. We had picked up my son Christopher on the way, and checked into the hotel right on the waterfront of the Cape Fear River. For those who don't know, Christopher, who is now in his fifties, was injured in an auto accident when he was twelve years old. He suffered significant head trauma and broken bones on every limb of his body.

As Caren and I were settling in at the hotel, Christopher went down to the river-walk along the Cape Fear River. A half an hour later Caren and I went down to meet Chris and notice a group of about a dozen people some 50 yards down the seawall. There was some kind of commotion going on, then one person stepped aside and I saw Christopher's empty wheelchair. I ran down the sidewalk ... Chris was lying there still shaking from a seizure. I knelt down, put my hand under his head, and a woman asked if I knew him. I remember ... probably too clearly ... I answered, "Yes, this is my son. This is my son."

Post-traumatic stress aside, this part of the reading is all too often ignored. I can never ignore it again. It is linked to the Transfiguration story because the mystical Jesus of the Transfiguration on the mountaintop is the same Jesus of a world down in the valley below that sorely needs healing. While Jesus was on the mountaintop with Peter, John, and James, the other disciples had tried to heal a boy and were unsuccessful. They were unsuccessful because they had seen an object, not a person. The disciples had equated the son's identity with his illness. They treated the son as if he was the demon rather than seeing him as a fellow child of God who needed healing. They had seen a demon that need exorcism. Jesus saw a father and son ... a father and son as persons ... fellow children of God.

In the world of Jesus illness, blindness, deafness, demon possession were seen as a result of sin. Demon possession was the term used for many variations of mental illness and unexplained afflictions such as seizures. And, the sins of the fathers were imposed on the children for generations. So, to the world around Jesus, this boy's seizures ... his demonic possession ... was caused by sins ... his or his father's. Was the boy to blame for his seizures? Was his father to blame for his son's seizures? Did they blame each other? How were they treated by others in the circle of family and friends?

Healing can sometimes happen without a curing of the disease. In my eyes, Jesus looked at the father and his son as fellow children of God. It was not their sin that caused this disease ... they were not at fault. They were not to be equated with sin just because of the son's disease. Their identity for Jesus was as fellow children of God needing healing, not demonic sinners needing to be marginalized. By accepting that sin didn't cause the seizures there could be healing in their family, even if the seizures continued. The demon wasn't the seizures themselves, but the family, social, and religious dynamics that produced blame and guilt. The healing was a new way for the family to live.

What we know about the transfiguration is that Jesus invited three disciples ... only three ... up the mountain. What we know is that the remaining nine spent the night in anxious futility, trying to do their master's work. What we know is that a father and a son suffered, even as the heavens broke open on the mountaintop. What we know is that some people who really needed Jesus that night experienced the ache of his absence ... even as a selected few basked in his glory.

What if this story ... like so many in the Bible ... is simply telling us the truth about reality here on earth? What if this story is describing what we already know about how life works, but fear to say aloud because we're so invested in happy endings?

So, what does the Transfiguration mean? For me, it means that Jesus who lived his life as if God were alive in him ... and that is what I believe it means to be God's Messiah ... is to be prophet and lawgiver. It means that God in human form is about justice, a right relationship with God and God's creation, and a healer of a broken world. It means more than mere words.

Not only did Jesus teach, but he also lived by his words. He lived with the poor and the dispossessed, and the marginalized, and the disenfranchised, and the outcasts, and the ill, and the unclean ... all those who were identified with their status by everyone else in their society. Jesus invited them to his table ... to God's table ... and he ate with them. He healed not only their blindness or their crippled feet or their leprosy but also their psyche and their souls. He included those who others deemed unworthy ... he included them because it was God's justice to do so, and it was God's law in action.

Peter and James and John saw Jesus transfigured. They saw the meaning of what it meant to live as if God was alive in Jesus. They saw robes dazzling white, beyond human comprehension. And standing next to Jesus they saw the archetype of what it meant to be a prophet and proclaim God's justice to the world. The prophet Elijah was the embodiment of the proclamation of God's justice. And, on the other side of Jesus they saw the archetype of God's law... Moses. The Realm of God would be a world where God's law would reign; where everyone would be in right relationship with God, with each other, and with all of God's creation. Moses was the ultimate lawgiver.

Jesus on that mountaintop projected the image of what the Messiah was ... living the life of God ... loving as God loves ... and being all he could be. This is what it meant to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. And, if what Peter, James and John saw with their eyes was not enough they also heard with their ears:

Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen listen to him!"

God was alive in Jesus. Jesus was loving the world and those in the world around him as God loves the world. And, Jesus was being everything God made him to be. In his words, "I did not come to abolish the Law, I came to fulfill it." Jesus came to proclaim the Realm of God ... a world as it would be if God reigned in every heart and soul, and in every community and nation. Two thousand years later we stand as those gathered in his name. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously in our own time then we too have to proclaim by word and example God's justice. We have to proclaim by word and example what it means to be in right relationship with God and with God's creation. And, we have to proclaim healing to a broken world.

We are called to welcome the stranger, to include the marginalized, to feed the hungry, and to empower the disenfranchised, to heal those broken in mind, body, or spirit. To look them in the eye so that that they know we see a fellow child of God ... not just labeling them by their illness or status. We are called to see God alive in each and every human being ... just as God is alive in us ... and God is alive in Jesus. We are called to go beyond mere words and into action ... "take up your cross and follow me." We are faced with the paradox of all paradoxes: We must "lose" our life to "save" it. It may mean sacrificing our own security for the sake of another ... even if that "other" lives in a war-torn nation thousands of miles away ... but we do it in the faith that the one who lost his life for us also rose to new life.

The Transfiguration of Jesus was certainly a mystical mountaintop experience. For Peter, James and John it was both frightening and it filled them with awe. But, it begins to answer the question of what being-the-Messiah may have been for Jesus ... the fullness of God alive in Jesus ... of God's justice and rightness with God and God's creation. And, it becomes for us a path to living in God's Realm today ... one in which we, in the words of our Baptismal Covenant promise "to proclaim by words and example the Good news of God in Christ." If this means anything at all it means bringing God's justice to the world we live in, living in a right relationship with God and with all of God's creation, and bringing healing to a broken world. It means living with God alive in us, and seeing God alive in each other.

Yes, we are weary and anxious ... weary of this pandemic and anxious about this war in Ukraine and its consequences. It is tempting to ignore what is happening halfway around the world, and to try to forget the past two years as if it never happened. Yet there are still people becoming infected with COVID ... and getting very sick and dying. And, there are innocent fellow human beings ... our brothers and sisters ... in Ukraine who are needlessly suffering. The mystical Transfiguration of Jesus isn't going to bring an end to this pandemic. Nor will it cause the end of bloodshed or stop Putin's aggression. However, when we can love the world ... and every other creature in this world ... the way that God loved this world in the life of Jesus, then we become brokers of peace and healing in this broken world.

I end this morning with a letter from Bishop Howard:

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Diocese of Florida,

Today as your Bishop, I am calling on each of you and your congregations to be in prayer regarding the unlawful, unprovoked and brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. I ask for you to remember this in your own personal devotions and for all congregations of the Diocese to include these prayers in every service of worship tomorrow.

Join me in prayer that the Ukrainian war might conclude swiftly and with justice, that the innocent might be shielded from harm and that nationalistic aggression, abusive power and self-justifying violence might cease. Pray, too, for the whole Christian Church in Ukraine and especially for the small Anglican congregation of Christ Church in Kyiv.

Almighty God our Heavenly Father, guide the nations of the world into the way of justice and truth, and establish among them that peace which is the fruit of righteousness, that they might become the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen.