

The Transfiguration of Our Lord B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 14, 2021

Mark 9:2-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

If you worship regularly at Dove of Peace, it may be quite some time since you've thought about the transfiguration of Jesus. That's because we've mostly used the last Sunday before Lent for a Mardi Gras celebration of community and music and food. The Covid pandemic this year prevents us from doing Mardi Gras and offers us the chance to get reacquainted with the Transfiguration of Our Lord. A particular event in the story of Jesus. Something extraordinary happens to Jesus in the presence of only three of his followers. Jesus changes shape. The fourteenth century English term "transfiguration" is derived from the Latin version of the Greek word *metamorphosis*, which simply means a change in shape or appearance. In fact, although the story is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, only Matthew and Mark use the word *metamorphosis*, "transfiguration." Luke simply states that the "appearance of his face changed." So the Transfiguration is the temporary illumination of the earthly Jesus as a heavenly being, in the presence of only three of his followers: Peter, James, and John.

Now, not everything that Jesus ever did gets turned into a holy day or a special Sunday. Jesus fed five thousand people, but we don't have Feeding of the Five Thousand Sunday. Jesus healed ten lepers, but we don't have Leper Sunday. Jesus had dinner with a short tax collector named Zacchaeus, but we don't have Wee Zacchaeus Sunday. Some things get elevated, get lifted up by tradition for special attention. But not all things. The Transfiguration has been a big deal for a long time in the eastern Orthodox Christian churches. On the cover of the service folder (for those who have one) is a Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska name for the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Transfiguration's a big deal in Eastern orthodoxy. It was late to catch on in what we call the Catholic west. Where eventually it got pegged to August 6. On the Catholic calendar. August 6, which occasionally falls on a Sunday. Putting Transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent was actually a Lutheran innovation in worship that took place a few decades after Luther. For Luther himself, this would have been Quinquagesima Sunday. But this later Lutheran innovation has been widely adopted in Protestantism. Perhaps there is some wisdom and some merit in this Lutheran innovation, this Lutheran configuration of Transfiguration.

Somewhere in the British isles, somewhere under the influence of Celtic Christianity, people developed the idea of "thin places." In Celtic lore, heaven and earth are only three feet apart. Is that true? The Bible doesn't say that at all. If somebody told me that hell and earth are only three feet apart, I might believe that. But the optimistic and lovely Celtic expression is that heaven and earth are only three feet apart. And in "thin places," that distance is even shorter.

Thin places are places in the world where heaven and earth come close. This is a popular idea in new age religions. For people who care about spiritual vortexes and harmonic convergences, there is this idea that certain places have spiritual power. The Celts say that the island of Iona is one such place. The new age people say that we may even have such a place in Sedona, Arizona. I certainly felt a sense of holy awe when I was fortunate enough to visit Machu Picchu in Peru. Those who are schooled in philosophy will refer to “the Sublime.” In places like Iona, or in musical performances like our classical guitar concert this afternoon, or in the smile of the Mona Lisa, we speak of “the Sublime.” But the Celtic culture has this lovely and down-to-earth concept of “thin places.” Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. And in some places, the gap is even thinner.

Now, in the Bible, Jacob dreamed of a ladder with angels going down and up. And Jacob exclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” [Genesis 28:16] That was a thin place. Moses was out being a shepherd in the wilderness, and he was at Mount Sinai, and he saw a bush on fire that did not burn up. It burned, but it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” [Exodus 3:3] Little did he know what he was getting into. Little did he know he would be back at Mount Sinai a few years later to pick up the Ten Commandments. Mount Sinai: a thin place.

Mountaintops are often perceived to be thin places. If you believe that heaven is up *there*, God is up *there*, then a mountaintop is a place this is closer to heaven, closer to God. Not three feet apart, as the Celts assert. But in a certain worldview, a mountaintop is closer to heaven. And so the Transfiguration event is a place and an occasion where heavenly glory temporarily breaks through into earthly reality. And as is the case in the Bible, the three men with Jesus are terrified. In the Bible, the glory of heaven and the glory of God is usually pretty terrifying for mortals.

The challenge of thin places, when we encounter them, is what to make of them. If the Grand Canyon is a thin place, we can visit and enjoy it, but what does it mean to the living of our lives? In the gospels, the Transfiguration is deeply embedded in a context about the kind of Messiah that Jesus is. It’s highly significant that only three trusted disciples are allowed the privilege of being in this thin space, of seeing the Transfiguration. And yet, in the paragraphs immediately surrounding the Transfiguration, they will each distinctively deny the cross, the suffering, the death, the humiliation of the suffering Messiah. Those closest to Jesus, those privileged enough to see this Transfiguration— Peter, James, John— are the ones who will give Jesus the hardest time as he journeys toward Jerusalem. It must not be so, Peter says. Grant us thrones in your kingdom, James and John say. They have trouble with the core of the message. We all do. Paul said he prayed three times asking for relief, and Jesus told him: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*” A very Lenten message. Which is why the Lutherans placed Transfiguration adjacent to Lent. Because we struggle with God’s glory and how it paradoxically shows itself in weakness, in turning the other cheek, in the poor in spirit, in the pure in heart, in the peacemakers. The vision of Jesus in his glory, in the company of the great ones, in dazzling white, whiter than even an OxiClean commercial, on the

mountaintop— that overwhelming beauty and glory vanishes instantly, and what lingers in our ears is the command of God the Father: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And for Peter and James and John, that is going to be hard. They don’t want to hear what Jesus has to say in these verses and chapters that surround the Transfiguration. They in particular don’t want to hear about weakness and suffering and death and taking up your cross.

Back in Genesis, Jacob had said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” That’s the meaning of the entire Christian religion, when applied to Jesus. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” *He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.* “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

Our thin place is Jesus. Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. But in Jesus, they come together. The Lord is in this place, this Jesus, and we did not know it. Transfiguration is a momentary event when it became clear to Peter, James, and John. But they still could not really embrace it, assimilate it. Not yet.

The message of Transfiguration is adjacent to Lent. Because the glory of the heavenly Jesus is actually found in the teachings and works of the ordinary Jesus, and in the work of his passion in Jerusalem. *This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him.* Our hymns today are clear that the lesson of Transfiguration is learning to embrace the Lord who is in this place, in this thin place, called Jesus. Meeting God in this thin place, and following. *How good, Lord to be here! Yet we may NOT remain. But since you bid us leave the mount, come with us to the plain.* And in the final hymn, in words from Christians of a thousand years ago: *Alleluia you are sounding true Jerusalem and free; Alleluia, joyful mother, bring us to your jubilee. Here by Babylon’s sad waters mourning exiles still are we.* With our ancestor Jacob may we finally exclaim, God is in this place, and now we know it. Amen.