

“What the Light Reveals”
February 14, 2021 Transfiguration Sunday
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

I’ve shared a few times over the years that I’m a longtime comic books fan. And, by extension, I’m also a big fan of the Marvel movies that feature all my comic book heroes in live action. One of my favorite comic book heroes is Dr. Strange. I always liked him because he wasn’t big and strong. He didn’t rely on his muscles to win but on his intellect. I was always sort of a nerd in school so I could relate to someone who wasn’t very physically powerful.

But Dr. Strange is also a master of the mystic arts. His movie portrays that beautifully. It’s really a well-done movie and I recommend watching it. Not to spoil it too much it starts with Strange, a successful and brilliant neurosurgeon, involved in a devastating car accident that leaves his hands mangled and useless for surgery. In his search to regain the use of his hands he exhausts the limits of western medicine. So, he spends his last bit of savings to travel to Katmandu and find a guru he’s heard can help him through eastern medicine.

When he arrives he discovers all she has to offer is what he’s always considered quackery, maps of the body showing chakras and instructions in acupuncture. He rejects all of that and the woman tells him, “You are a man looking at the world through a keyhole.” She then shows him what happens when the keyhole is widened and with that he begins a journey into an expanded reality beyond the material world. I believe that’s the journey Jesus has invited his disciples, Peter, James and John, to make.

The story of Transfiguration is a mystical story and not factual. By that I mean it’s meant to portray a reality that’s beyond words, beyond knowledge. Much like the resurrection stories that it pre-figures, transfiguration is a sort of impressionistic painting, a tableau meant to reveal a deeper reality behind what we can actually see. In this event Jesus pulls back a curtain on reality. He shows the disciples there is more happening to them than they realize because he’s desperate for them to understand.

Just prior to this moment, six days earlier, Jesus had asked them who they think he is. At that time Peter made his famous confession that Jesus is the Messiah of God. Jesus seems pleased by that response and then goes on to explain to them that in Jerusalem he will be arrested and killed and in three days raised from the dead. Peter cannot accept it. He rebukes Jesus and, moments after having praised him, Jesus calls Peter Satan. If Peter doesn’t understand what hope is there for the others? So he takes three of them up a mountain to try and widen the keyhole of their vision.

Over the years the Church has tended to see in this story a confirmation of its belief that our faith is the successor to Judaism, its replacement. Unfortunately even our hymns reflect that view. It’s simplistic and narrow, and I’m convinced not at all what’s intended by the gospel writers. When we hear the story we imagine that Jesus has somehow summoned or conjured the presence of Moses and Elijah to hand him their authority. But suppose this moment isn’t staged by Jesus at all. Suppose all he does is remove the veil to reveal Moses and Elijah standing beside

him, beside all of them, all along. He is a product of Torah and the Prophets, the long Jewish tradition and not its replacement.

And it's his commitment to that tradition, to the way of Torah and the call of the prophets, that leads him to Jerusalem to defend it in the face of those who have compromised it. He knows sacrifice, his sacrifice, is the only way to fully embody their tradition. He must enter human suffering entirely as an act of compassion to bring God's kingdom to light.

But there will always be those who just cannot see it. As Paul tells the community in Corinth, for some the truth is veiled. He says it's veiled to those who are perishing. I think that's a little harsh, but then he is arguing against people who've been trying to undermine his ministry in this letter. It's always a challenge to sort out Paul's personal feelings from his theology. I would say, though, that those who cannot see the glory of God's presence around them, a glory revealed in the face of Christ, are in a sense withering on the vine; their spirits are diminished. That's not meant so much as a judgment as a natural consequence.

We're inclined, when we're exposed to something beyond our comprehension, to try and fit into our understanding. We want to reduce it, simplify it, domesticate it. That's what Peter wants to do. He wants to create a shrine, a tribute to commemorate this moment, rather than allow it to open him up to a new understanding. When we experience God's light shining out of darkness, it's not enough to mark it with a memorial. That light is meant to change us in a fundamental way. What's revealed in that light is the reality we cannot see on our own.

In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, written in 1965, Thomas Merton shares an experience that in an instant changed his understanding of himself and everyone around him. He writes: [Read from pp. 153-5]

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of "separate from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by taking vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, "spiritual men," men of interior life, what have you....It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what

we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. [Merton, pp. 153-155]

Becoming aware of our unity with all other people, with the whole creation, is what the light of God reveals. It removes us from our narrow existence and uncovers a reality beyond our imagining. God's light shines within all of us, the same light, the same God, and directs us to each other. It gives us a desire to let go of our need to justify ourselves and protect ourselves so we can live for others.

So, transfiguration isn't only about Jesus and who he is. It's about us. What the light reveals is our true selves. We discover in God's light that we are more than we imagine, more than we can see through the narrow keyhole of our vision. We are the past that has shaped us, even as it accompanies us, and we are the future that calls us to acts of compassion and sacrifice. We are one with each other and with the whole creation, what the mystics call God's first incarnation. And in that light, our sight unveiled, we will see God's glory as if looking in the face of Christ.

Amen