

“In the Face of Jesus Christ”
February 11, 2024, Transfiguration Sunday
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Can you remember a time in your life when you suddenly understood the world and your place in it? Moments of clarity like that can be pretty rare. A lot of our time is spent slogging along just trying to get from day to day with our sanity intact. We don't often make the connection between what we're doing in the moment to a greater purpose. Life can feel like a jumbled pile of puzzle pieces that never seem to come together. But every now and then we discover insight, and it all makes sense. Maybe it's when you're putting your child to bed and see that sweet face sleeping, and you realize that's what it's all about; all the headaches at work and the scrambling around, it's all to create a world where that child can be secure and healthy and peaceful. Or maybe you can find it in nature, out in the woods or at a lakeside...or on a mountaintop. You discover a sense of calm and connection with the universe. You realize you're not just a cog in some huge machine, unnoticed and forgotten, but a vital part of a vast creation where your decisions and actions make a difference and your presence and participation in it matters.

Years ago, when I was finishing my training for the ministry, I enrolled in a program called Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE. CPE was required by my presbytery before I could be approved for ordination. It was basically a chaplaincy program in a hospital. We students were assigned different floors or areas of the hospital to provide regular pastoral care to patients and staff. We would also rotate spending the night there to be on-call for emergencies anywhere in the building. It was grueling and often uncomfortable. Not many of us really felt adequate for that kind of ministry. We also met regularly together and individually with our supervisor to reflect on our visits with patients and examine the dynamics of our conversations. At the time, I didn't really appreciate the value of that work. It felt forced and inauthentic. It wasn't until several years later, after I'd been in the ministry a while, that I could look back on that experience and realize how important it was. It was meant to help me get out of the way of my own work. If I wanted to be truly present with another person, then I needed to set aside my own agenda to see them fully. But I could only do that by understanding my own motivations and interior struggles. CPE wasn't just “busy work” to give me experience in the hospital; it was in some ways transformative.

Coming to that realization was a moment of insight that helped me connect my past with my present. I could see how events weren't just random but had meaning. And that's what this story of Jesus' transfiguration is for readers of Mark's gospel. On the mountaintop, as three of the disciples see Jesus fully for the first time, they discover everything they've been experiencing with him, all the teaching and healing and feeding, it all was meant to point them to a new reality, to the presence of God among them. And they see in the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ their connection to the whole history of Israel, to the Law and the Prophets,

Moses and Elijah, and nothing is random for them anymore. It all fits together and it all makes sense.

They are dumbfounded and a little confused. Peter is portrayed as especially dense. But that's part of Mark's genius, I think. Who is Peter, after all, if not one of us? His foolishness, his desire to hang on to that moment and try to enshrine it is an almost defensive reaction. It's what we do when truth comes too close. We try to put it at arm's length and objectify it. The interruption of God's voice is meant to pull them back into the moment to pay attention to where they are and allow themselves to be shaped by Christ.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration is meant to change us. It's not a "proof" of Jesus' authority or credentials. What's revealed on that mountain is a reality we all carry within ourselves. God's glory, the divine Inner Presence, is part of us; it is our essence. It connects us to the past and can shape our future, if we allow ourselves to embrace it and see our true selves reflected in it.

When Paul writes the Christians in Corinth and addresses all the struggles they're having in trying to understand the meaning of the gospel he's taught them, he recognizes that their resistance isn't entirely their fault. They've been so conditioned by a world that objectifies the divine through objects or people, such as Caesar, that it's hard for them to step away from that understanding and fully embrace God's presence revealed in Christ. When he writes that the gospel is veiled to certain people who are "on the road to destruction," he's not condemning them. He's saying they are so mired in the culture around them that they can't see God's glory. They're blind to it. What he wants for this community is to awaken them to God's presence by seeing the face of Jesus Christ within those around them and within themselves.

That has always been the real challenge of the gospel. It's not lack of obedience or failure to accept dogma that stands in our way, we obey and believe blindly all the time. Our challenge is seeing the glory of God in ourselves and in the face of those around us. What Paul was saying to the people in his day and continues to say to us is in Christ God has fully entered human experience and revealed the glory that lives in us. He goes on, a little later in this letter to say, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Franciscan priest and mystic Richard Rohr explains how the Christ revealed in scripture is a manifestation of the divine presence in the world. When we become one with Christ we allow God's glory to be revealed through us so that, as Paul writes in another letter, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The story of Transfiguration is a way to convey the presence of God's glory in Christ, not exclusively but inclusively. What's revealed on the mountain through Christ is our true selves. By following Christ, becoming one with him, we are transfigured and God's glory is revealed through us.

But we cannot hold it at arm's length. We can't build shrines and try to capture God. Peter was content to be an observer, to build a tent and sit back and watch. But we have work to do if God's glory is to be revealed. Jesus calls his followers to participate in revealing God's glory. We're called to embody and enact God's compassion and generosity and justice. That's how we reveal the face of Jesus Christ in the world. We become Christ's presence so God's light can shine in us.

Paul would have confined that activity to the community of believers because he was convinced Christ would soon return and put everything right. Their job was to be a community through whom the returning Christ would work. But after two thousand years we've come to understand that return in a different way. We've come to realize that Christ is present everywhere and we have a responsibility to acknowledge that presence by advocating for those who are forgotten or neglected or rejected. When we stand with asylum seekers, with transgender youth, with people of color seeking economic equity and reparations, with elderly people seeking security, with children struggling with poverty and food insecurity and hunger, when we do these things we are extending God's glory into the world. We are pointing to the face of Jesus Christ present in the lives of all those who suffer. When God speaks from the cloud, "This is my beloved son, listen to him," that's what it means. It means putting ourselves aside and becoming the world's "slaves," as Paul says, for Jesus' sake.

As we do that, we'll discover that many of the uncertainties and fears that hold us back will fall away. The jumbled pieces of our life's puzzle will start to come together and we'll find our true selves, the persons Christ calls us to be begin to take shape. You will be transfigured, made new, in God's light and the face of Jesus Christ will shine through you.

Amen