

Transfigured and Transformed

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

In our Gospel lesson this morning we read once again (what some have called) the 'Transfiguration Story'... admittedly, it is a strange story... a story about an experience the disciples had with Jesus...

And all it tells us is that Jesus brings with him Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain – and while Jesus is praying (and the disciples are trying to stay awake) something very unusual happens... the Bible tells us that Jesus begins to glow... In fact, it tells us that a radiant light begins to shine forth...

And as all of this is taking place – not only can the voice of God be heard – but we also see Moses and Elijah...

And as you read this story you get the sense that each one of the disciples are left puzzled... so much so, that they choose to keep the whole experience to themselves...

Now this is a strange story... and it seems to me that many of us would struggle to identify with an experience like that...

But then I started thinking this week about my own experiences in life... and as I've mentioned on more than one occasion I've always had a lot of respect for my own pastor - Pastor Gerry Gaeta... in fact, he was a big influence in my decision to go to seminary... and to this day I still believe that there's no person on this earth who can lead worship in a more beautiful way...and I say that because he had a beautiful voice, interesting sermons, and was very intellectually gifted...

But I also remember the day that Nora had a miscarriage and how he was right there praying with us – and doing his best to comfort us with words of encouragement and with words of hope... he was like an oasis in the desert of grief...

And it was on that day (and in that moment) that (similar to the experience the disciples had way up on that mountain) I, too saw my pastor in a whole new light... I saw the man that others in my congregation had talked about but I had never fully experienced... (the man who could be gentle – and loving – and full of God's peace)... I saw in him a compassion that I could not *truly see* on Sunday mornings... a goodness that seemed to radiate from deep within... and because of

that experience my eyes were opened to see a whole new side of the man I thought I knew...

And so it makes me wonder – is that what the transfiguration story is trying to teach us?... that it's not that Jesus changed (nor was he transfigured) on that mountaintop – but that the disciples were finally able to see (what had always been there from the very beginning) – they were able to see the glory of God in Christ Jesus...

It's sort of like when you read a Bible story that you thought you were familiar with (or when you look more closely at one of your favorite paintings in a museum – or when you really listen to your favorite song and you take the time to try to understand what the composer is doing in the music) and you find yourself saying, "*You know, I never noticed that before*"... and it's that new discovery that not only opens up the imagination (but it also helps us to appreciate more deeply that 'thing' we thought we knew so well)...

And it's not that the music changes, or the art changes, nor does Jesus change - but the hope in all of those things is that by looking more closely *we'll change* (by broadening our understanding – and appreciating the complexity of those things just a little bit more)... but most importantly, that we'll be able to see things in a whole new light (the same way the disciples saw Jesus on the top of that mountain – so long ago)

And sometimes I wonder if that's part of the faith journey for us as well... (that just as the disciples were willing to climb to the top of the summit with Jesus) we, too, should always be striving to see the wonder of God in new and unexpected ways... that by putting away our preconceptions – or the limitations that we place upon our faith – or the small lenses that we allow ourselves to peer into – that even our own understanding of the God we think we know can still become richer, and deeper, and more alive (if we allow ourselves to be surprised by God)...

In fact, I remember about 4 years ago experiencing a lot of sciatic pain in my lower back and left leg... and during that time I kept looking for God to come to me as a healer... and all I wanted God to do was take away my pain... and so, in prayer and constant meditation I was pleading with Jesus to use any means necessary to alleviate my suffering...

and I didn't care if he did it through my physician – or the hands of the chiropractor – or through the prayers of the people who were praying for me... all I

wanted *was God to take this cup away*... and so that was the lens in which I was searching for God... I was searching for God the healer...

But do you know what I learned (and am learning) through that experience?...

I've learned that sometimes God doesn't come to us in ways that we would expect... and I say that because my pain didn't miraculously disappear – nor has it completely left me even now – but what I do believe God is doing in my life (through this pain) is coming to me as a teacher (so that I might grow to be more *gentle* and *patient* and *compassionate* to the people I serve)... that I, too, might learn about the fragility of life... that I might learn to appreciate my health so much more... and that I never lose sight of the fact that every day is a gift...

And, of course, it's nice to believe in a god who only throws parties and showers us with all good things - (and in essence God does) - but sometimes God will also come to us (just like he did to the disciples on the top of that mountain) in unexpected ways – in new ways... and it's not that God changes (but that sometimes our eyes are allowed to see a different aspect of the God we worship in a whole new light)...

And when we do – I guess you can say that it is us who are transfigured... it is us who are changed to see the glory of the Lord in a new way...

I want to close by simply mentioning that since the beginning of this pandemic I have been intrigued by the stories of other Christians who have experienced great hardships in their faith or who were truly challenged to see the presence of God in very difficult times...

And one of our sisters in Christ – a young woman who's name was Kayla Mueller (who's faith has given me great strength in the worst days of the pandemic)... you probably know the name because at some point (a few years ago) she was the American in the news who had been kidnapped while doing humanitarian work in Syria - and after being captured by ISIS - she was then killed in captivity...

And I suppose it would make you wonder why anyone would put themselves in harm's way - but from what I've read she was an unusual young woman who felt a special connection, not so much to the Good Shepherd or to images of the Gentle Jesus – but rather to Jesus the 'Suffering Servant' on the cross... and unlike most people who will only look for God in blessings and happiness (this is what she wrote)... she says,

"I will always seek God... Some people find God in church... Some people find God in nature... Some people find God in love; but I find God in suffering... I've known for some time what my life's work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering... and when I do, that's where I find God"

She wrote that before she went to the Middle East to help people who were being affected by the Syrian Civil War (she looked up to those who stooped down) and showed the mercy and compassion of God to others... and to keep a long story short this face of God that most people would never seek (eventually found her)...

and in the last letter that was ever sent to her parents she shares with them (not only that she felt the presence of God being with her in captivity) but how she was able to see our Lord in a new light... how she saw Jesus with her in her own suffering...

Listen to her words for a moment... she writes:

"I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God... And I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator b/c literally there is no one else ... And by God, And by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall."

And then she goes on to say:

*"I have been shown in darkness, light; and have learned that even in prison, one can be free... I am grateful... And I have come to see that there is good in every situation, **but sometimes we just have to look for it.**"*

And friends, I think that's true for us as well (even in the darkness of these days)... that wherever you are in your relationship with the Lord (and wherever you are in your life right now) allow yourself the freedom to be surprised by God – to see Him in a new light – and to know that wherever the path may lead (that our Lord will never leave you) but will always come to you in a new way (just like he did to those disciples – way up on that mountain...)

May the God of Light fill your heart with hope... may our Lord's peace be granted to you as a gift of Grace... and may your eyes always be opened to see Him in a new light...

In Jesus' name we pray... **Amen!**