



The Transfiguring Light of Christ



A Sermon By
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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Grace Episcopal Church
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Matthew 17:1-9

I have some questions about this gospel reading. My first question is this: How did the disciples know the identity of the two guys talking to Jesus? Were they wearing name badges? Was Moses carrying two stone tablets and did Elijah show up with his flaming chariot? The text does not say. Okay, I can let that pass, but for whose benefit did this incident occur? Was it to give Moses and Elijah the benefit of seeing the fulfillment of the law and the prophets? Was the Transfiguration for the benefit of disciples? It's an odd episode because at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, they have already seen Jesus perform numerous miraculous works. They've seen healings, exorcisms, walking on water, and calming the seas. They've seen the feeding of the five thousand. This story occurs right after Peter's confession, when he says that Jesus is the Messiah. As miraculous as this mountain experience was, they weren't being told something that they didn't already know. So what was the point? What does the Transfiguration mean?

Two years ago I took two transformative and life changing classes. One was called Resistant Theology and it was about indigenous Christian theologies that rose up in opposition to European and North American missionaries western hegemonic attempts. That's a fancy seminary term that means we tried to force other people to culturally want to be like us. The other class I took was on the history of racism in America. Each class was extremely powerful in its own right but taking the two classes during the same term was extremely discomforting. But I mean that in a good way. It wasn't like I was ignorant about white privileged or had any delusions about the real and present dangers of racism. But I personally had never had the experience of being so very self-conscious about my own racial identity. It seemed that I couldn't get away from it. A common metaphor used in discussing race relations is that whiteness to white people is like water to a fish in the ocean. It's not something that one thinks about; it just there and its all around you. But because of these two classes, I kept getting smacked in the face with it over and over, multiple times every week. And this thing that was slamming me in the face was not at all pretty.

One day after the racism class, I was walking across campus with one of my classmates who was also taking both these classes simultaneously. We both agreed about what a huge impact the combination was having on us. We both agreed that it had been far too seldom that we had had the opportunity in our lives to open honest talks with people of different races about racism. And then I started nattering on about my white guilt. I was lamenting how these classes had made my racial identity this malignant presence to me that I couldn't get away from. That I was haunted by these ghosts from a common past that just wouldn't go away. Then I stopped dead in my tracks and realized how incredibly boneheaded and insensitive my comments were, and I said to her, "Hey, I know this is hardly the same thing and I can't possibly understand what it's like to be African American, but this thing that I just said - about feeling like my racial identity being something I can't get away from - is that sort of part of what it's like to be black?" She stopped for a moment, looked at me and said, "Yeah, it sort of is...maybe a little."

For me anyway this was a mountaintop experience. Like the disciples, I wasn't being told anything that I didn't already intellectually know. I've heard countless stories from black friends about being harassed and facing discrimination in school, at work, at the bank, the emergency room, trying to rent a flat, or any of the other common place activities that as a member of the dominant white culture, I take for granted. Sadly, I mostly know about the realness of racism because of having heard enough ugly ignorant racist comments uttered by other white people behind closed doors. I've studied enough history to know that the entire economy of this country was built on the backs of slave labor and land theft from indigenous people. And I know only too well that I am direct a beneficiary of these injustices. But that semester and most especially

that afternoon walking across the VTS grove with my friend, transfigured my understanding. It transfigured my comprehension. It shed a dazzling and blinding light on those things that I thought I knew but really didn't understand. And I fully believe that this heightened awareness was the presence of God working in my life. It was Christ taking what I was seeing, feeling, and experiencing, and illuminating it so that I saw these truths in a new and transformed way for what they really were.

The thing about these dazzling bright moments of illuminations that crop up in our lives is that we are simultaneously driven to two very different reactions, just like the disciples. Our first reaction, when the light of Christ shines into our life, is to want to hold onto the light and stay with the light and never leave it. We have the same reaction that Peter did. "Man, oh man, this is so cool! Let's build a shrine so we can stay up here forever and not lose this experience." And our second reaction, when true realization deeply sinks in, is to want to fall on our faces, shaking and trembling. I think part of it is simply awe at realizing we have encountered the living God, that deep in our bones reaction when we start to ponder the incomprehensibility of God. We feel our utter smallness in relation to the presence of God.

But I think the biggest part of falling down in fear and trembling before our transfigured Lord is this: once we have a Christ illuminated understanding, we run out of excuses. We cannot walk away and claim ignorance because we have seen truth and now are beginning to understand this truth. Immediately before these verses, right after Peter tells Jesus that he is the Messiah, Jesus tells his disciples that they too are going to have to take up their cross if they are going to continue to follow him. He is about to turn his face towards Jerusalem; he is heading towards Calgary. And finally, the disciples are starting to get it. They really start to get it.

We are about to enter into the blessed and sacred season of Lent. It is a time when we return to and renew our baptismal vows. In our baptism, we are joined with Christ in his passion and death, so that we are also united with him in his resurrection. But before we do this, we have Epiphany-tide of which today is the last Sunday. Epiphany is the season of Christ's illumination. It is a season for stopping and taking note of what God has been illuminating, and transforming, and revealing to us through the light of Christ. And so I challenge to you to do something in these last waning days of the Epiphany season. I challenge each of you to take some time for quiet reflection to sit and think and meditate of what Christ is transfiguring in your life. What illuminated truths have been coming to you and informing your realization of truth? And in light of these truths, what crosses are you being asked to take up and follow Christ into the upcoming season of Lent?

The biggest mistake that I think we can make is the same one that Peter almost makes. It is to think that we can just stay up here on the mountaintop and bask in glow of illumination and not do anything about it. That is not what we are called to. The Son of Man has been raised up, so we can and must speak of what we have seen. We need to take the light of Christ with us from this mountaintop and back out into the rest of the world – to our everyday lives, to our homes, our work places, schools, bars, Little League games, book clubs, or whatever. We have seen the Light of the Christ. Now we have to bear and carry this light down the mountain and out into the dark corners of the world.

Amen.