

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

“Jesus took with him Peter, and James and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

“Suddenly there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

“A bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’

“When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

Jesus was transfigured before them.

Transfigure: To transform the appearance of somebody or something, revealing great beauty, spirituality, or magnificence. To exalt, to glorify, to make holy.

One of the five major milestones in the life of Jesus is the Transfiguration. The other four are his Baptism, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. Our liturgical calendar declares today, the last Sunday of Epiphany, to be Transfiguration Sunday.

Today on Transfiguration Sunday, we have the story of when God comes to earth and joins all time together in the person of Jesus, in front of three ex-fishermen, who fall down on their faces in terror.

It might be difficult for us twenty-first century Americans to appreciate the different things going on in this story told so simply in the gospel of Matthew. We are being shown that all things are coming together in the person of Jesus, the Christ. We can see that Moses represents the Law, the ancient Hebraic Law that has guided the Jewish civilization for centuries. And Elijah represents the prophets of the Old Testament and the rich traditions they have of telling truth to power. We recall many instances of Jesus mentioning the Law and the Prophets. And here they are in the persons of Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus on this mountain-top. All they know, all they stand for, is transferred to the transfigured Jesus, who brings to the world a new experience of God.

“This is my son, the beloved,” comes the voice of God. “With him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” “Listen to him.” Once they get over being terrified, Peter, James, and John understand that Jesus is now the successor to the law and the prophets. Jesus is to replace all that came before. His transfiguration as the Savior and new Messiah is complete.

And they – Peter, James, and John – are themselves transfigured. There is no way they could not be. In the epistle for today, Peter testifies to his own transfiguration.

He says true prophecy can come only from those men and women who are moved by the Holy Spirit spoken from God. He testifies to the transfiguration of the believer. Transfiguration comes as a lamp shining in a dark place, and as the morning star rising in our hearts.

The morning star rising in our hearts.

In Peter's testimony, we believers can identify our own personal experiences. Our faces may not shine like the sun, and our clothes might not become dazzling white, but transfiguration is not as rare as we might at first think it to be. Life transfigures us every day. We are always becoming new people.

A couple of years ago, when our son Lucas and his wife Becca were expecting their first child, he telephoned us after their first check-up in the first trimester. He said that when he heard that tiny, fluttering heartbeat on the fetal monitor, everything in his life changed. His whole perspective on life changed. Of course. Transfiguration.

Anyone who has been to a graduation or an ordination has been witness to transfiguration. Anyone who has gotten a new job, received an award, or been elected to office has been transfigured in some way or another. Anyone who has fallen in love, who has been married, or who has had a child, has been transfigured. The grace and power of the moment overwhelm us. A morning star rises in our hearts. We become believers in miracles. We may ourselves be the miracle. We are transfigured.

But life is not all roses, is it? When we suffer the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a marriage or partnership, the failure of a business, loss of a job, foreclosure on a home, or the debilitation of disease or injury, we are transfigured. Coping with these challenges may shape the rest of our lives. These are the trials that test our faith. And our faith asks us to be transfigured from victims into survivors. From dwelling on how we were injured by the past into putting our steadfast faith in the future.

Our baptismal covenant calls us into a life of transfiguration. We are asked, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" Only with God's help can we respond, "I will." Only with God's transfiguring grace in our lives can we overlook the faults, short-comings, and strangeness of our fellow humans and seek the Christ that lies within them. Only with the grace of God can that disagreeable, scary person be transfigured into a vessel of Christ the living God before us.

When we can accept the Christ in others, we may also come to acknowledge the Christ in ourselves. Our baptismal covenant calls us to transfigure the entire world. How can we do that if we ourselves are not first transfigured?

And, as mainstream, middle-of-the-road Christians in America today, we seem to have our work cut out for us. To our shame, we have been too silent.

Our political climate in recent times seems to encourage us to think badly of people who hold opinions that are different from ours. It's becoming okay to discount other people and hang unkind labels on them. It's becoming okay to marginalize and to act in a hateful manner. This climate encourages us also to think unkindly of people who don't look like we do, who don't talk like we do, who don't dress like we do, who don't worship God the way we do. We may be encouraged to regard them as less than real Americans. And we, of course, ARE the real Americans. Perhaps it would be a good idea to make all the others go away, so that we don't have to share our space and our resources with them. They hate us, we hate them, they will never be like us. It's useless to try.

We are pitted one against the other regardless of who we may be. We seem to be compelled to choose a team. Regardless of what we do, we may be called rude names, and others may act hatefully towards us. We are encouraged to be ugly.

This fractious climate is destructive in at least three ways. One, it makes it almost impossible to have a calm, grown-up discussion of different points of view. Often, the loudest or meanest are the ones who get their way. We seem to be engaged in unending warfare. This is not democracy.

Two, this climate leads us to retreat to insulated enclaves of thought, separating one American from another, regarding each other with suspicion and hostility. Instead of being the great melting pot, our country is in danger of becoming a jagged, fractured image of its former self, like hundreds of shards of a broken mirror scattered on the ground.

And three, since we are Christians and hope to live a Christian life, we should remind ourselves that this climate of exclusion and separation drives us away from God.

I'm no better than anyone else, though I do try to avoid the political frenzy these days. But I have my prejudices and biases. I cling to certain stereotypes even when I know for a fact they are inaccurate and false. I can't help it. These things seem to be part of my brain cells. You know how it is: you see a certain person and automatically, without hesitation, an unfavorable thought or feeling pops in your mind. You didn't consciously think it; it just appeared in your head, whether you wanted it there or not. Perhaps it's people of color, or people who speak English with a heavy foreign accent. Maybe it's those guys who wear their pants slouched

halfway to their knees. Could it be girls who have dyed their hair a strange color not found in nature? I have to admit that people who drive BMWs get an automatic unfavorable reaction out of me. I can't explain it. But they're not the only ones. I have a list that goes on. I'm not proud of it, and I wish it were not so. Perhaps you, too, have a list, and you too wish it were not so.

Having these automatic negative feelings and judgments about other people is one of those burdens that I'd like to lay down and leave behind me as I continue my spiritual journey.

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday, and though I've never been much good at Lenten disciplines and such, I'm going to try a new discipline this Lent. You might want to give it a shot as well.

For the forty days of Lent, whenever I see one of those people and have an automatic unfavorable reaction, I'm going to counter-balance it with a favorable opinion. I probably won't get rid of my prejudices and biases, but I hope to offset them with pleasant thoughts. Maybe that BMW driver did cut me off on the freeway, but I'll bet she's kind to her mother. What kind of person would dye her hair that shade of pink? But she has good taste in shoes. It's a simple exercise of self-deception. I'm too opinionated for my own good, I harbor a lot of low-grade animosity toward innocent people, and my stereotypes too often take a front-row seat. But I hope to atone for these short-comings with conscious kindness as compensation for my innate meanness.

It's a simple Lenten discipline. Anybody can do it. I invite you to join me. If every day for forty days is too much, perhaps you could start slowly and try to think nice thoughts just a day or two at a time, just to see how it goes. Whatever, the Christ that resides in all persons will thank you for your kindness.

If I'm conscientious and steadfast in this simple discipline, maybe I just might be transfigured a little in this Lenten season. Transfigured into someone a little closer to the children of God all around me. Transfigured into someone a little closer to God. Perhaps even transfigured into someone who's a little more holy.

To transform, revealing great beauty, spirituality, or magnificence. To exalt, to glorify, to make holy.

May a morning star of transfiguration rise in our hearts. May we become a little more merciful, a little more compassionate. And may we be blessed to hear it said, "This is my son, this is my daughter, these are my children, my beloved. With them I am well pleased." Amen.