

Sermon, Last Epiphany, Transfiguration, March 3, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.” (Luke 9:38)

It is interesting to me that in Luke’ telling of the transfiguration story, Jesus has gone up the mountain to pray, taking just a few disciples with him. It is not surprising that Jesus would need this time apart. Earlier in the same chapter Jesus has commissioned the twelve disciples to go out two-by-two to proclaim God’s kingdom and to heal. Right after that is the feeding of the five thousand: the one that yields twelve left over baskets. Then Jesus engages in his challenging conversation with the disciples where he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “The Messiah of God.”

While Jesus is still praying, his face is changed, and his clothes become *dazzling* white—beyond even the power of “Tide with bleach” to get them so. In the King James version it says, “And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening.” (Luke 9:29) I love the word ‘glistening.’ Jesus’ robes not only shine, it is almost as if they are giving off sparks! Coming out of their sleepy, half-stupefied state, I imagine the disciples might at first think they are dreaming. Peter could not have had a more powerful affirmation of his witness that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. No wonder he wants to capture this extraordinary moment by setting up booths. Then the disciples are overshadowed

by clouds. They hear a voice saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35) It is not for nothing that the word for “overshadow” is the same word that is used in Luke in the story of the Annunciation. The angel tells Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you... (Luke 1:35) Almost as if nothing has happened, there is a complete reset of the scene. It is simply Jesus alone and the disciples on the side of a mountain. Dazzling garments, Moses, Elijah, clouds, all “special effects” are gone.

The scene of the Transfiguration is one of the most iconic we have in the New Testament and has been depicted many times in the eastern Orthodox tradition. In the Nicene Creed we say that, “God is Light from Light...” This way of imagining God comes to us most strongly in the Gospel of John when Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Again, in the Orthodox tradition, we have the concept of “uncreated light.” This is not the light of the sun, stars, or moon; it is not the light of lanterns or candles—or now that we have harnessed electricity—the overhead fixture in a room. Uncreated light is the light of the burning bush, or Moses’ shining face that must be veiled. It signals the presence of the holy, the very presence of God.

I am no expert on icons yet have become fascinated in recent years by some things I have learned about them. The first step in writing an icon—and they are

described as written, not painted—is applying the white gesso layer to a linen-covered wood panel that has been treated with glue. The gesso is made of marble dust; 15-20 coats are applied to create a hard surface. Translucent egg tempera paints in various colors are then used to create the images. The final step is to apply the gold leaf. Wonderfully, it is adhered to the clay surface of the icon with the iconographer's breath: the wood, clay, and dust are thus united with the heavenly. However, it is the white gesso layer underneath that reflects the light.

Last week a dear high school friend of mine posted a picture of a painting she had just finished on Facebook. Debby has been a horsewoman her whole life. Over the years she has boarded horses, taught riding, and fitted saddles. She has worked with various people in physical therapy on horseback, such as those recovering from neurological difficulties after surgery, or who are developmentally disabled. She now shares her horse farm with her son and his young family, giving her more time to devote to her other love: painting. The painting she shared is of a horse with his fuzzy winter coat and is mainly of his face. She shows the light as coming from behind him, so there is a special glow showing through his mane. His eyes are luminous. It struck me how like an icon this is. I think there is a special communication between us and the animals who love us. That unconditional, loving regard comes through their eyes, bringing us healing and peace.

Verses 37-43a of today's Gospel reading are optional, seen by some as not really part of the Transfiguration story: an inexplicable add-on. However, I found myself making connections between what happens on the mountaintop with the encounter Jesus has the next day having come down. I found myself moved by what the father says to Jesus. He does not first ask for specific healing from Jesus or draw attention to himself. He says, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son..." Look at my son. For me, this parallels the voice Peter, James, and John hear from the cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Jesus, too, is a beloved, only child.

On this last Sunday of Epiphany we are certainly meant to see who Jesus really is. Yet Jesus does not leave his light back on the mountainside. He carries it with him. It is now in Jesus's loving gaze. Don't we often long for God's sustained gaze upon us, that gaze that lovingly calls us back into wholeness? Jesus has come to—quite literally—enlighten us. Paul affirms this in 2 Corinthians: "For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)

There are so many places in Scripture that speak to our seeking after God's face so that we might see and be seen. I hear the echo of Psalm 27: "“Come,” my heart says, “Seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek.’ (Psalm 27: 8) There is

Psalm 32 that says, “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.” (Psalm 32:8) I actually like the sense of the KJV version better, “I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.” And there is that extraordinary blessing that God gave to Moses for Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:22-27)

Here is something else I have learned about icons. When we gaze at them, we are not looking into a mirror image. Our gaze is returned. A few years ago Br. James Koester, SSJE posted a wonderful meditation on praying with icons. (I recommend exploring praying with icons for those who may be looking for a Lenten prayer practice). He says, “Icons are meant to be gazed upon as you would gaze upon one whom you love: with openness, expectation, affection and anticipation. When you gaze upon the one whom you love you do so in the expectation and anticipation that your loving gaze will be returned with equal affection.”

