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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Sunday, February 14, 2021
Mark 9:2-9

Come Holy Spirit and kindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your love. Amen.

“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.” Reading this from the comfort of over 2,000 years of historical distance, we often chuckle at Peter. “Oh, how foolish Peter is,” we say to ourselves. “Didn’t he know that was a silly thing to say upon seeing the revelation of Jesus’ true glory? Let us build three memorials to capture the moment? Really? Didn’t he already know who Jesus was? Hadn’t he been paying attention?” But if we actually try to imagine ourselves in the situation, perhaps we can be a touch more sympathetic toward Peter, James, and John. I suspect that we would find that we might have acted not too differently.

Isn’t it just so human that, when confronted with the true brightness of another’s brilliance, we want to put that person on a pedestal? We want to separate them, elevate them – perhaps worship them – but in doing so, aren’t we also isolating them, containing them, and keeping them at a safe distance? It’s curious, isn’t it? That as we elevate, we also attempt to capture and, perhaps even domesticate, this glory.

This really is foolishness because transcendence cannot be captured in memorials. It cannot be contained, bottled up, and used to decorate a display shelf for later appreciation. Like the great blessing of daily manna for the Israelites wandering the desert, transcendence can only be experienced fully in the moment – it cannot be stored up and hoarded for later.

One must open oneself to the experience of glory whenever and wherever it makes itself known – wherever it’s brilliant shine bursts the fissures and cracks in our humanity – for if you try to capture it, you will realize that you missed it. This is the cost of revelation: that it can only be experienced. Revelation of transcendence is embodied and incarnated, and its fleeting nature means it cannot be captured in memorials or celluloid or data bits for later enjoyment. Like God itself, we cannot tame transcendence or contain it... we can only experience it.

When thinking about our Gospel story of Jesus’ transfiguration and Peter’s response, I tried to imagine what this might look like in our day; in our lives; in our time. I think it is sometimes easier to experience God’s glory shining through our children, especially when they are very young and still dripping of God. Our eyes are attuned to see their shining glory, but instead of experiencing it fully – and accepting the fragility and transience of the moment – we wish to capture the moment forever in video. How many times have you been to a music performance at school and can’t even see your own child because of the dense forest of other parents with their phones and iPads held aloft and blocking your view?

Think of the pictures of crowds at arena concerts, and the excited concert-goers who are not even looking at the elaborate staging, choreographed dancing, and the performers that they paid a lot of money to see, but instead are peering at their six-inch phone screen as they are videoing the event. Rather than experiencing the concert fully, their focus is on trying to capture a moment that they never fully experienced in the first place. It’s like when we confuse the signpost for the thing to which it points; focusing on the finger pointing at the moon rather than on the moon itself.

As the disciples knew, experiencing glory can be frightening. So often, we prefer not to experience it directly but rather have it diluted, diffused. For God’s glory unfiltered can be too much – shine too bright – and can blind us from realizing that this glory resides within us as well. That is what is so scary about the revelation of this glory within Jesus and seen shining through others, that this truth is also indwelling within our imperfect souls, too. Instead, we would much rather

experience this glory a bit more distantly, so that, perhaps, we may not be faced with this challenging truth.

Think about Moses after he spent 40 days and 40 nights full communion with God on Mount Sinai. Scripture says he descended the cloud-shrouded mountaintop bearing not only the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments but also bearing God's glory fully upon his face. His visage shone so brightly with glory that it overwhelmed the Israelites. It terrified them – it was just too much. So, Moses veiled his face when in the presence of the people, just so they could bear to be in his company.

For the Israelites, God's glory overwhelmed Moses' humanity and was too much to take. Moses was transfigured. And, through his transfiguration, he revealed the pure brightness of the glory that resides within him, and also within them all. It is disconcerting to realize that we, too, can shine this brightly. However it is that we experience the revelation of inner glory shining through ordinariness, we are transformed. Through the experience of another's inner glory, we become more aware of our own.

We think our humanity is just this ordinariness – the good and the bad; the fragile; the mortal; the imperfect. But our humanity also includes this spark of glory; this imprint of God's own image and nature. I believe this is the deepest intention of the incarnation: God became man to show us how to live fully human lives – lives radiating the truth of our glory that is borne through our mortal, fragile, and imperfect lives.

All this thinking about revelations of glory and transfiguration, had me thinking of the gospel hymn "This Little Light of Mine". A perennial favorite, it seems there are as many versions of this hymn as there are stars in the sky. But I've been thinking of one particular version – the one we sing at every chapel in the Good Shepherd Preschool – and this has made me wistful for the return of our children.

Over the past months, we have been working with Amy Brennan, our Preschool Director, on preparing the school for reopening in April for a shortened and extended term and then for fuller reopening in the fall. We have worked hard to discern a path through this pandemic desert that will allow us to welcome back our children. We've missed them so much – missed the squeals of joy on the playground; missed the buzz and energy around the building; missed seeing their faces alight with joy as they arrive at school and are greeted by their favorite teachers.

But most of all, I've missed leading chapel with them and singing "This Little Light of Mine". This simple song we teach our youngest members of our parish family reveals a surprisingly big truth. At Good Shepherd Preschool, we work hard to instill this truth within each of our beloved children. They learn that they are beloved children of God. And each one has within them this special light of glory. And we encourage them to let their light shine, not only for themselves to see and be reminded of the truth, but to be a beacon to others. These young children seem to embrace this truth quite easily – they feel no shame in accepting that they have a bright light within them. I wonder why we adults struggle so much to believe that this light is also indwelling within us?

So, I say to you this morning, do not be afraid to embrace your inner light and let it shine. Do not be afraid to behold it in others, for you will learn from them how to find and shine your own light. And do not be afraid of glorious transfiguration – you will never be the same again, but you will not wish to return.

My favorite verse of the song goes, "Hide it under a bushel, no! I'm gonna let it shine!" That is how we change the world. That is how we carry on Christ's work of reconciliation and redemption. When we reveal our glory, we invite others to do so as well. And person-by-person-by-person, the world is transformed into the kingdom of God.

I would like to close with a poetic prayer for Transfiguration Sunday, written by theologian and writer William Loader.

O God,
We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
the months of ministry transfigured to a beam of light,
the light of the world,
your light.
May your light shine upon us.

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah,
your word restoring us, showing us the way,
telling a story,
your story, his story, our story.
May your word speak to us.

We open our eyes and we see mist,
the cloud of your presence
which assures us of all we do not know
and that we do not need to fear that.
Teach us to trust.

We open our eyes and we see Peter's constructions,
his best plans, our best plans,
our missing the point,
our missing the way.
Forgive our foolishness and sin.

We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
not casting us off,
but leading us down, leading us out –
to ministry, to people.
Your love endures forever.

We open our ears and we hear your voice,
'This is my beloved Son, listen to him!'
And we give you thanks.

Amen.