

**Brightness When You Need It Most**

**Matthew 17:1-9**

**Transfiguration Sunday**

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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*Six days later, 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 bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud 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. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*

I am guessing that by now, most, if not all of you here in the Sanctuary are aware that there are two different bulletin covers. Those of you joining us online, you can see both images side by side right about ... now, if technology is cooperating with our livestream wizards. The same artist created both. The first image is a painted icon of the Transfiguration. If the image on the bulletin in your hands looks more or less "normal," you have that one. If the image on the bulletin in your hands looks like a neon rainbow exploded on top of it, well, you have the second one, Glitch Transfiguration. The artist, Kelly Latimore, painted the original as a commissioned piece for a congregation. Later, he was showing it to his nephew in some electronic format, and the screen "glitched" briefly. You know those moments, when the picture on the screen pixelates or seems to distort a bit and the colors intensify and for a moment or two, you might not even be too sure what you're looking at? Kelly's screen glitched like that, and it inspired him to paint a second Transfiguration piece capturing that moment. But even if you're looking at the "normal" image Kelly painted, there's nothing "normal" about the story it depicts.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John high up on a mountain, and his face starts shining like the sun, Scripture tells us, and his clothes became bright as light. And then, for good measure, all of a sudden Moses and Elijah are there, having a conversation with Jesus — yes, that Moses and that Elijah, from the Old Testament, two people who perhaps more than any other represented both the law and the prophets, two others who were reported to have seen the face of God in all its glory and lived to tell about it, but also, you know, hadn't been alive on this earth for, well, ages. So Jesus is glowing and to dead people, and Peter's response is, "Yeah, this seems good. We should probably stay here, where things like this happen, as long as possible." Which means, if I understand the text, that whatever was going on, however you want to interpret it — in that moment, the disciples were not afraid. That will change in the next moment, but for a brief glimmer of time, something is so compelling, so reassuring, it's all Peter can see. He is ready to set up the tents and send out a change of address notification.

Whenever scripture is especially puzzling to me, I find it helpful to look at what happens right before, and right after, and consider where in the larger story it fits.

Right before the Transfiguration, in Matthew chapter 16, Jesus is asked to show the authorities a sign from heaven. He declines, saying something about how they would not know how to recognize it if they saw

it. He journeys with his disciples again, who completely misunderstand what he tries to teach them. Peter has a really good day, recognizes Jesus as Messiah, but follows that up with a really bad day, contradicting Jesus so much, Jesus finally calls him a hindrance. This leads Jesus to offer some of his hardest words, about how any who want to follow him will have to take up their cross and follow, maybe even losing their own lives along the way.

Right after the Transfiguration, in Matthew chapter 17, Jesus tells the disciples even as they are descending the mountain that there will be suffering. Just after that, they come to a crowd, where a man is suffering, and Jesus is told his disciples tried, but could not heal him. Jesus heals him, and then tells the disciples in a private conversation that it would help if they had just a little more faith. And then he tells them again that the cross is coming, and he will lose his own life.

In other words, on either side of the Transfiguration, we have a picture of discipleship that is ... rough. On both sides, we see people trying and failing to understand Jesus and follow his teachings, and constant reminders that this life will not be without hardship and suffering. But smack in the middle of all that — Jesus, shining like the sun, his clothes as bright as light. Smack in the middle of the challenges and complexities of daily living — radiance. Smack in the middle between the incarnation and the resurrection — transfiguration.

Thank God. Incarnation (the birth of Christ) is when the light of the world emerges from the darkness of the womb, and resurrection (the raising of Christ) is when the light of the world emerges from the darkness of the tomb. Those are our best days. The transfiguration, I believe, is for all the other days. All the in-between days. Days when there is no womb or no tomb to emerge out of, just the wrenching march of the long, long middle, when the weeks pile up and not enough changes or the months pile up and too much changes. There, right there, even there, the light of the world manages to break through. And for a moment, even if just for a moment, we are not afraid, and have reason to believe we're going to make it after all.

Lillian Daniel, a pastor in Chicago, wrote a book about her first years in ministry.<sup>1</sup> One evening meeting began with a discussion about preparing and serving a meal at the homeless shelter. Except, she writes, the long, passionate discussion was not about the practice of hospitality or homelessness as a systemic evil. It was about the correct recipe for chili mac. It was 45 minutes about large cans of chili, or small cans. Minute 50 was about whether to buy grated cheese or do the grating themselves. At minute 51, she writes, "I lost my religion. I lost my eschatology. I lost everything I'd ever believed in when the clerk interrupted to ask, 'Can we back up a moment? Did you decide on grated cheese, or purchasing a grater? I need to get it right for the minutes.'" But then one of them said, "I'd really hate to be homeless on a cold night like this." And everyone paused. And pens were put down, and it was quiet enough that they could hear each other breathe. It was just one minute out of 52, she said, but eternity was caught up within it. Everything changed, because the discussion was no longer about the ingredients of a recipe, but about the people who would be eating it.

Even in the midst of the mundane, the light of the world is breaking through.

My friend Sarah is a pastor up in Virginia. Like me, Sarah spent time as a chaplain in a children's hospital. Sarah was working on the pediatric oncology ward when she met an eight year old girl named Samantha. Samantha was adorable, and Samantha had osteosarcoma, cancer in her bones. She had lost all her hair from treatment, and she was a long-term patient, spending countless days in her hospital room. Most of the time, she didn't feel very good. But one time, Sarah says, she stopped by her room and Samantha had a box full of markers dumped out all over her bed, and she was drawing hair on her little, bald head long, luxurious hair that was every color of the rainbow, hair like no one on earth could ever dye it. She was laughing, and she laughed so hard she snorted, and that made her mother laugh, and her mother's laugh made her laugh even harder, and it was a moment of deep and sacred silliness. They paused to take a picture, and in that picture, Sarah says, Samantha was shining like the sun.

Even in the midst of heartbreak, the light of the world is breaking through.

As you know, earlier this week, yet another episode of gun violence ripped through yet another college campus: Michigan State University. Yesterday, Michigan State faced off against Michigan in a men's basketball game. You might remember that I have lived and worked in Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, so I have experienced something of that rivalry. Michigan State's colors are green and white; Michigan's are maize and blue, and so deep is the usual animosity between campuses that during the week of a Michigan-Michigan State home game, some downtown restaurants put signs in the windows that say, "Everything green has been taken off the menu; nothing green is welcome here," which is actually both unfortunate and unhealthy, but certainly makes a statement. Last fall it all escalated even further, when assault charges ended up being filed as a result of a fight between the two teams after a football game. I say all of this simply to communicate the depth of emotion that usually fuels these face-offs. Yesterday, though, five days after the world stood still in East Lansing, the arena in Ann Arbor was awash in green. Michigan fans held up signs that said "Spartan strong," Players warmed up in shirts that read, "Michigan basketball stands with MSU," and right before the game began, the announcer said, "Tonight, all of Michigan is one."

Even in the midst of trauma and grief, even if just in the smallest of ways for the briefest of moments, the light of the world is breaking through.

There are moments, when monotony is overthrown, and fear is vanquished, and evil is silenced, and despair is overcome. There are those moments. They may be brief — they may seem like a bright glitch in otherwise gloomy world. But those moments are there. And any time light of any sort breaks through, it is a Transfiguration moment, a moment when God chooses to speak a strong, steady, radiant word that while the world may be broken, it is also beautiful. It is a moment that reassures us God has not given up on us or left us alone. It is a moment that will soon carry Jesus all the way through the hardest moments of his life, and if we let it, it will do the same for us.