Transfiguration       Walking Around Shining Like the Sun

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, on February 11, 2018 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH.

Help us listen, O God, for your word of life and entrust our lives to your Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, whose glory is made known in love for us. Amen.

Well, what do you make of that story? I must admit that as I sat at my desk, surrounded by commentaries on the Transfiguration, I found myself recalling the words of Alice in Wonderland who said, “There is no use trying,” said Alice; “one can’t believe impossible things.” To which the Queen responded, “I dare say you haven’t had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

I don’t know if you have had breakfast yet, but if not, I heartily encourage you to make your way downstairs after the service to enjoy the pancakes prepared by the Men’s Council. Perhaps, it can even become a time for you to share with others at your table some of the impossible things you have seen and heard by God’s grace.

For Mark, this story is a hinge-point of his gospel, halfway between Jesus’ baptism and resurrection. It comes six days after Peter had made the connection that Jesus is the messiah and then, almost in the same breath, reprimanded Jesus because he didn’t want to hear that the messiah must suffer and die and only then be raised from the dead. In response to Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, the Transfiguration gives us a mystical vision of where his suffering will lead. It paints a picture of Jesus in his glory, a vision of life beyond what is apparent to earthly eyes most of the time.

There are lots of details in this story on which we could meditate: the presence of Moses and Elijah; the cloud that descends upon them, the voice whose words harken back to Jesus’ baptism, the dazzling white raiment of Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “But what if the point is not to decode the cloud but to enter into it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, life—and are never the same again? Whether such biblical encounters come disguised as “good” or “bad”, they have a way of breaking biblical people open, of rearranging what they think they know for sure so that there is room for more divine movement in their lives.”

I think what stands out to me the most is that after the revelation they received, Jesus led his disciples back down the mountain. Think of it: Jesus could have stayed there. Perhaps he was tempted to stay there. After all, this transfigured state, attended by Moses, Elijah and
the three disciples, was much closer to the state of glory that Jesus deserved than what’s coming next. But he comes back down.

Down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of life in the world. Down into the disappointment of disciples who misunderstand his mission. Down into the religious and political divisions of the day. Down into the jealousies and judgments that still strain our relationships. Jesus refuses to be a superhero as we might prefer, but strengthened by this transcendent moment he chooses to come down to us, even to lay down his life that we might share in his glory.

Jesus’ refusal to stay on the mountain top in a glorified state is good news for us because it tells us that he is not afraid of what is difficult in our lives. He will not reject us on account of our failings. His descent down the mountain reminds us that we don’t have to hide the hard parts of our lives from God. For God took on human flesh precisely to be with us through thick and thin, through life and death; through death into new life.

In response to the love that compelled Jesus to come down the mountain to confront the powers of evil, God’s people are called to be in mission. In our liturgy today we are remembering our mission partners around the world and renewing our vision of being connected in Christ to a worldwide fellowship that transcends culture, race, economics, nationalism, and politics.

Because we have glimpsed God’s glory revealed in Jesus’ transfiguration, we are free to “listen to him”, to take up his mission. Christ’s mission is one of solidarity, of seeing that we are one with Christ and our partners around the world as we follow Jesus in caring for those for whom the world has no place. Martin Luther wrote, “There are those who seek to penetrate the immensities and to see God. One ought rather to sink into the depths and seek to find God among the suffering, erring, and the downtrodden. Then the heart is free from pride and able to see God.”

In Louisville, KY there is a plaque at the corner of 4th and Walnut, now 4th and Muhammad Ali Blvd., in an intersection know as Thomas Merton Square. Sixty years ago, Merton, a reclusive, but world-renowned monk who lived in a monastery an hour outside of Louisville, had a transfiguration experience at that intersection. Walking down the street he was watching people and was suddenly struck by the realization that he loved them all. He was overwhelmed by the feeling that he belonged to them and they belonged to him. It was like waking from a dream in which everyone had been separate, but now he could see clearly that they were all connected. If only everyone would realize this. “Yet,” Merton said, “it cannot be explained. There is no way to tell people that they are walking around shining like the sun.”
Merton went on to say, “Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the
depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, ...the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

What are your hopes for glory for this world? If the church followed Jesus’ way of love, trusting that glory cannot be seized, but will be revealed in our walk with Jesus into the midst of the brokenness we all face, how might our world be changed? Can we envision a spirit of love, relationships of interdependence, institutions and nations that promote justice and peace? Isn’t this the glory for which our world longs?

Through our mission partnerships close to home and around the globe we have caught glimpses of that glory haven’t we? We have seen lives reclaimed; barriers of fear struck down; friendships developed across great divides. The Transfiguration of Jesus is not one more impossible thing to believe before breakfast. It is a reminder that we are resurrection people. So trust the mercy of the One who came down the mountain—the One who confronted the dark places of the world and still seeks out the dark places of our lives. Follow him in love into the places to which God calls you. The promise of what the disciples saw on the mountain, the promise of the transfigurations that come to us as gifts in everyday life such as the vision Merton saw at 4th and Walnut, the promise of the Gospel, is that in following Christ we, too, will discover that we, like Jesus, are God’s beloved who are being transfigured by God into glory like him.