

KEEPING CHRIST'S GLORY FRONT AND CENTER

Matthew 17:1-9

Peter, James and John saw something they never expected to see and the power of that vision literally bowled them over. There was no question that they loved Jesus. They followed him, ever since that day he called them away from their fishing boats and their nets to fish for men and women. They loved Jesus. They were in awe of his teaching, his healing, and his love for them and for everybody he met. He was always surprising them. And yet.... Jesus was familiar. They ate with him. They prayed with him. They walked with him. They rowed in the same boat. They slept in the same room. They had become comfortable in his presence. Even though just a few days before Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God, to them he was still *just Jesus*. That was until they saw him transfigured on the mountain. What a vision!

Jesus' transfiguration has been pictured in Christian art since at least the 4th century. In the Eastern Orthodox Church apprentice iconographers in monasteries learn to paint all the icons, doing the preparation work, filling in colors, sketching the outline, etc. But when they are deemed ready, the first icon they actually paint (or *write*) by themselves is the icon of the transfiguration. And that's kind of surprising, because it is not an easy composition. The face of Christ or of a saint would seemingly be a much easier place to start. But, if an iconographer truly understands and prayerfully can render the transfiguration, then he or she can paint all icons. The icon of the Transfiguration pictures Christ in all his glory. The same heavenly light that shines through Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration shines also through all the saints. That is what the iconographer is picturing.

Among the many artistic renderings of the transfiguration one of the masterpieces is right in front of us. The Tiffany stained glass window of the Transfiguration in the front of St. John's Church is a masterpiece. The church was built in 1890 and there was originally a different window in the front of the church. It was replaced by this beautiful Tiffany window in 1901 as a gift from Miss Josephine Leeds in memory of her parents, John and Eliza. An interesting historical note about the window is that the original design was rejected by Miss Josephine. She requested *different hands* and for more solid ground under Jesus' feet. Many images of the transfiguration show Jesus' giving a sign of blessing. This image shows Jesus' hands lifted up in prayer. And, of course, while transfigured, thanks to Miss Josephine, we still see Jesus standing on solid ground. The left window shows Moses with the book of the law. Below him is pictured one of the disciples – probably John. The right window pictures Elijah and below him the two other disciples on the ground – Peter and James. In the small windows underneath, to the left is John the Baptist pictured holding a banner with the words, *Behold the Lamb of God*. Below the transfigured Christ is an image of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. And below Elijah is pictured our patron saint, John the Evangelist writing his Gospel on a scroll.

What do you suppose Miss Josephine and St. John's 6th Rector – Charles Morris Addison – were saying to us by putting this magnificent window of the Transfiguration right in the

front of the church? What were they saying to us and what were they saying about St. John's Church?

There's no mistaking who is front and center in our church is there? Jesus is right there transfigured before us in glory. Jesus appears in radiant light. That is the first thing we see as we gather together in his name. It seems to me that that image calls us to be a community that puts Jesus first: first in our worship, first in our ministry, first in our priorities, first in our hearts and lives. Jesus is front and center at St. John's.

The Transfiguration invites us along with Peter, James and John, to see Christ's glory. I'm glad that Miss Josephine put Jesus' feet on the ground. We can imagine and see Jesus' earthly ministry – his calling the disciples, his teaching, his touching and healing the sick, his crying over Jerusalem, his arrest and crucifixion. The transfiguration invites us to see in Jesus' earthly ministry not only his humanity, but to recognize also at the same time, the glory of his divinity.

We're called also to see Jesus and to recognize his glory in all the ways that Jesus is present among us.

- We see Jesus and recognize his glory in the scriptures. He is the living Word of God who was from the beginning, who was made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and is revealed in Scripture still as we read it today.
- We see Jesus and recognize his glory in worship and prayer. As we sing to his glory. As we confess our sins and pray for forgiveness. We recognize both his humanity that touches our own and his divinity that connects us to God.
- We see Jesus and recognize his glory in the Eucharist. As the priest lifts up his hands like Jesus in prayer for the whole community. As we receive him in Bread and Wine. That is a profound and glorious moment when we *connect* to Christ in Holy Communion.
- In the Baptismal Covenant the celebrant asks if *we will seek and serve Christ in all persons...?* In our various ministries as we serve Christ in the service we give to others... In our fellowship as we recognize Christ in each other and the love we are so very privileged to share in his name... Christ's glory **shines!** Indeed we are called to see Christ and recognize something of Christ's glory in each person we meet.
- We're even to recognize Christ's glory as we know the living presence of Christ in our own lives and hearts. As you and I bear the life of Christ within us his glory is present within us as well.

In the Western Church the Transfiguration is primarily understood as having a Christological meaning – as telling us something important about Jesus' divinity and humanity. In the Eastern Orthodox Church the Transfiguration is celebrated primarily because of what it tells us about the transfiguration or *divinization* of the resurrected

human nature. The splendor that we see with Peter, James and John of Jesus' glory revealed on the mountain is the same splendor of divine light that shines through the saints, and is the very same splendor God intends to shine through you and through me as the power of Jesus' resurrection takes hold in our lives.

After the incredible glimpse of his glory as he was transfigured before them, Jesus took Peter, James and John back down the mountain. They came down to a chaotic scene where a crowd had gathered around the other 9 disciples who were unable to heal a boy of epilepsy. From there Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem. Teaching them along the way about the centrality of serving others Jesus led them to his own death and Passion. It was only after Jesus' death and resurrection that Peter, James and John could understand the profound glimpse they had into his Jesus' glory that day on the Mountain.

So we who glimpse Jesus' transfigured glory this morning will soon humble ourselves in the somber penitence of Lent. Ashes will be placed on our foreheads reminding us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We'll take on personal disciplines of prayer, abstinence, study and ministry. We will follow with Christ towards Jerusalem and his arrest, trial, death and crucifixion. And through Holy Week and Good Friday we will come anew to Easter joy.

Through it all Jesus' transfigured glory appears in stained glass before us. But it is most profoundly through the wonder of Jesus' death and resurrection that we comprehend with Peter, James and John the fullness of that revelation of Jesus' glory upon the mountain. As we sing in the last verse of that great Epiphany Hymn (*Songs of Thankfulness and Praise*, #135 in hymnal)

*Manifest on mountain height, shining in resplendent light,
where disciples filled with awe thy transfigured glory saw.
When from there thou leddest them steadfast to Jerusalem,
cross and Easter Day attest God in man made manifest.*

Amen.