<u>February 15, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Transfiguration Sunday</u>

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"Listen to him."
Matthew 17:5b

One of the realities in the life of a church is that the staff and clergy are always looking ahead—to the next service, the next Sunday, the next season. There's music to be selected and practiced, bulletins to be prepared and printed, sermons to be pondered and written. This coming week, we'll celebrate Ash Wednesday, which marks a shift in the liturgical calendar, and next Sunday will be the first of the five Sundays in Lent.

But before we move on to our next season, we need to close out the old one, the one we've been in since early January. The season of Epiphany—which means "revelation"—the manifestation of Jesus the Word, Jesus the light, coming into the world. Six weeks ago, we read the story of the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus hears the voice of God telling him that he is beloved, and that he has work to do. Jesus' commissioning, if you will.

Today, we read the story of the Transfiguration, which functions as a sort of bookend for the Epiphany season. Jesus and his disciples ascend a mountain, and there, at the top, they have another encounter with God, reminiscent of Jesus' baptism, with God again declaring Jesus's belovedness, and that Jesus is here on earth to carry out God's vision for the world.

But the last thing God says atop the mountain is a message for the *followers* who are with Jesus. "Listen to him," God says. In the gospel passage that we heard last week, Jesus told his friends that they were light and salt, and that they needed to go out and BE that salt and light, and now God is chiming in to say, "Yes. That. Listen to Jesus and go do that." It is the commissioning of the disciples, and all the rest of us who would come after, *and* it's Jesus' succession plan.

Because although Jesus' work isn't entirely done yet, the days ahead of him are far fewer than those behind him. He's headed to Jerusalem, and he knows what awaits him there. So his motivation to put a succession plan in place is high. It's a different kind of plan, too, from that of his prominent ancestors, Moses and Elijah, the other two figures who are there on the mountaintop. Moses died just short of taking his people into the promised land, work he handed off to his successor, Joshua. Elijah got taken up in a whirlwind, after having anointed Elisha to take over for him.

For Jesus, he doesn't name just a single successor to carry on his work, but many. And I don't mean 'many' just in terms of there being multiple first century disciples, but rather the uncountable multitude, across time and across space, who are meant to continue Jesus' ministry. That is, us.

We speak of this succession plan in our final blessing, when we say, "May we who have been touched by the Word made flesh be Christ's body for the world and his hands to bring blessing." Our weekly commissioning.

I've always liked the kind of word play when we talk about the body of Christ (that is, Jesus, the individual human person, the incarnation of God) and then all of us *as the body of Christ* (many human persons, together, made in the image of God). We may look like separate individuals, but really we are networked together as one, powerful, collective thing. One body.

We are like *Pando,* which is the name given to the largest and oldest living organism on earth. Located in the center of the state of Utah, Pando looks on the surface to be this enormous grove of individual quaking aspen trees—at least 47,000 of them—but it is, in fact, one interconnected, interdependent, living thing, with a root system over 80,000 years old. *Pando* is apt imagery for us, as the Body of Christ, also because of its name, which means, in Latin, *I am spreading*.

Going back to our mountaintop…in the wake of all the other-worldly stuff going on, with Moses and Elijah appearing out of nowhere, and Jesus turning all white and glowy, and God's voice making pronouncements…in the midst of all that, Peter gets a little confused, thinking initially that this mountaintop whoopla is really what it was all about, and he wants to stay there, permanently. But no, the actual work that Peter and his friends and all of us are being called to is down in the valley below. And when we get there, what is it that we're going to do? What is it that we, *Pando,* are going to spread?

Love, or fear? Hope, or despair? Justice, or indifference? Peace, or cruelty? We've got some choices to make.

A few days ago, the renowned British actor, Ian McKellen, appeared as a guest on Stephen Colbert's show. He did the usual talk show thing of chatting about upcoming movie roles, as well as his long history as a Shakespearean actor, including his claim to fame of having performed in the premier of a play that Shakespeare is said to have collaborated on, but which wasn't professionally presented until 1964. McKellen starts to describe the scene which Shakespeare authored, but instead, stands up and delivers the climactic monologue.

The play is a dramatic biography of key points in the life of Sir Thomas More, who was executed by Henry the 8th, because of More's principled opposition to the king. The monologue—called the Strangers' Case monologue—tells the story of More speaking out against rioters on May Day, 1517. The xenophobic rioters were upset about the presence of immigrant workers from the continent, and were inciting violent attacks against them. While some of the protesters who injured or killed these foreigners were brought to justice, most were pardoned by King Henry.

The monologue is a plea for empathy toward immigrants and refugees, with Thomas More imploring the crowd to put themselves in another's shoes: "Imagine that you *see* the wretched strangers," he says, trying to humanize those they view as completely other. He searches for common ground: What if *you* were forced to flee to another country? What if *you* then arrived there, poor and desperate, and unwelcome? What if you were treated with the same hostility as you're showing toward the

immigrants and refugees in your community? “What would you think to be thus used?” Shakespeare wrote.

The monologue ends with More’s dramatic pronouncement:“This is the strangers’ case. And this, your mountainish inhumanity.”

(And I know I seem to give you homework each time I preach, asking you to read some article or listen to some interview, but you really, really need to watch McKellen’s presentation of this monologue. It’s so stunningly moving.)

The themes of More’s speech are calls for radical empathy, the Golden Rule, and the Christian responsibility to do what Jesus taught. He also argues practicality: that violence and exclusion only beget more violence and more exclusion, and eventually your society collapses. In mistreating strangers, you teach the world how to mistreat you; maybe you’re not the target now, but eventually, you’ll be the target of someone stronger than you, who doesn’t like something about you….. Cruelty creates a world in which no one is safe.

McKellen ended his presentation by pointing out that the words he’d just spoken were written by Shakespeare some 400 years ago. The meaning behind his words was clear—this monologue could have been written today.

Pando—we are one, integrated organism. Are cruelty, judgment, and violence really the shoots whose growth we want to encourage, and have spread? There is such *good* growth all around; let’s find and nurture that.

A friend recently shared a photo from Minneapolis, which showed a group of folks standing in a circle around several of their Somali neighbors —rideshare drivers in line at the airport—who were kneeling in prayer. The protective human circle gave them a chance to focus on their prayer, rather than be on the lookout for federal immigration officials who are targeting Somalis, regardless of their immigration status.

I haven't entirely kept up with Olympic results, but I did see a video of the first cross-country skier from Haiti, Stevenson Savart (suvah), who crossed the finish line of his latest event, the ski-ath-lon, in 64th place, welcomed by a wildly cheering crowd. To hear people expressing their appreciation for the persistence and determination of an underdog was incredibly heartening.

I've just begun reading a book by a woman whose story I first heard about, 5 or 6 years ago. Her name is Ruth Coker Burks, and by chance and circumstance, combined with radical empathy and a kind heart, she became a caregiver of AIDS patients who were close to death, and an AIDS awareness advocate based in Arkansas. This in a time when the disease was poorly or not understood at all, when no treatments were available, when a diagnosis carried with it not only great stigma, but also most likely a death sentence, and when many of those charged with taking care of sick people wanted nothing to do with these patients.

In 1985, Ruth had occasion to be at the hospital in Little Rock often, visiting a friend who was undergoing cancer treatments. She came to know

all the staff in that part of the building, along with their routines. One day she noticed a room down the hall from her friend, with a red tarp hung over the door, and outside were trays of food, untouched. Ruth observed that the nurses almost never entered the room, but when it was really necessary, they'd draw straws.

Eventually, curiosity got the better of her, and she slipped behind the tarp, and entered the room. Jimmy was the patient's name, and when Ruth asked him if there was anything he needed, he said he wanted his mom. Ruth figured that was something she could do, and after badgering the nurses for Jimmy's mom's phone number, she called the mom, who made it clear she wanted nothing more to do with her son. Ruth went back to Jimmy's room, and when she entered, Jimmy looked at her and sighed in relief, "Oh, momma, I knew you'd come." Ruth stayed by Jimmy's side for the next 13 hours, until he took his last breath. She ended up taking responsibility for finding a funeral home that would handle his body, and she buried his cremated remains in her own family's cemetery.

A few weeks later, she got a call from another hospital, who'd heard what she'd done for Jimmy, and she was pressed into service again. And again. Word spread. Her love and care spread. *Pando*.

Ruth described her ministry this way: "I wanted them to know that there was another human being with them while they died. I just wanted them reassured and I would tell them that I always felt like I was taking them across the river of death. I would carry them across. And I would hand them over to the people who love them and didn't judge them. And I

would hand them back over to God and to their friends that love them. And then, I would turn around and I'd be back on dry land." *[This is love podcast]*

We have been commissioned. Chosen. When we come down, off the mountain, into the valley, what is it that we'll choose to do, what shoots will we choose to nurture and help spread? The poet, Jeff Foster, has some ideas. He writes,

Feed the cat.
Fold the towels.
Clean the lint from the dryer.
Say thank you for someone's kindness.
And mean it.
This is the temple –
Not on some distant mountaintop,
but here,
in a messy kitchen,
in a real apology
in a long exhale
when you're stuck in morning traffic.
Enlightenment isn't an escape.
It's seeing, really seeing,
what's right in front of you.
It's staying.
Even when it's uncomfortable.
Even when it's brutally mundane.
There's holiness in every breath.
In doing the small things with love.
In the life you already have. *~ The Forgotten Corners by Jeff Foster*