

Sermon; Last Sunday in Epiphany; Church of the Ascension, Chicago; Feb. 14, 2021; Rev. Dr. Robert Petite D.Min.

“We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” I Peter 1:19.

While the Scriptures have their textual peculiarities and are often objects of intense scientific study and textual criticism in academia, I personally find myself more drawn to the Scriptures as a resource to guide my spiritual journey, then as any kind of intellectual pursuit.

I am deeply interested in the academic study of the Scriptures. In fact, my intellectual interest in can sometimes cause me to reflect on them more from my head than my heart. I try to guard against this tendency and to find some balance. (Pause)

I have always been fascinated by the story of the transfiguration. The story activates my imagination. My primary imaginative interest has much to do with reflecting on the story as a vision of assurance.

The story assures the disciples of the existence of a spiritual reality they could only have imagined, before their journey to the mountain with Jesus.

The story is presented three times in the Gospels and referenced in the Second Letter of Peter.

Theologically it is a story that attempts to make clear the identity of Jesus, and places him firmly within the Jewish prophetic tradition, alongside Moses and Elijah.

The story as it is presented in the Gospel of Luke provides us with a conversation between Jesus and the prophets about what he will accomplish in Jerusalem. This aspect of the story serves to place it within the context of the ministry of Jesus, and its ultimate fulfillment in the Cross and empty tomb.

One of the three versions of this story is always read on this day, the last Sunday of Epiphany, as a vision of encouragement for the dark and shadowy journey of Lent.

It is this presentation of the transfiguration as a vision of assurance for the Christian journey that I would like to lift up this morning.

But before I do that, I want to lay before you something of the character of Christian journey itself.

Our life in the world presents us with wide spiritual horizons and challenging questions that are central to our human existence. We are all hungry for an assurance that our lives are full of meaning in union with a God who has a plan for us, and with whom we have a deep and abiding connection in the midst of life’s trials and tribulations.

We clergy, like all lay people, wrestle with these questions of meaning too, as we mature and grow in the Christian life.

As I continue my own Christian pilgrimage, I find myself more urgently engaging these questions in the exercise of my faith; in my attempts to remain hopeful, not only for an eternal fulfillment, but also for humanity, in an increasingly complicated and dangerous world; and in my attempts to live a life of love for myself and my fellow human beings.

At particular times of our spiritual journey, we may become preoccupied with doubts about the meaning of our lives, and our ultimate end. Yet it is the very experience of living in the world, where much of the mystery of life is hidden from us, yet hinted at, that we are called by God's grace to work out our salvation, not so much by having faith as a possession, but by remaining faithful.

This was certainly true of the disciples as they struggled to know and follow Jesus, especially during the time of the passion. It was true of Peter in particular, despite his having been granted the experience of the transfiguration. Fear often overshadows the assurance that the vision provides.

The disciples eventually discovered, some later than others, that faithfulness, whether it is to a person, or to God in Christ, is a decision, a commitment. That faith is a trusting leap into the unknown, supported by the witness of the Scriptures and the tradition, that God is there and will remain faithful, no matter what the circumstances.

What is true of faith, is also true in our struggle to be hopeful. When times are dark and difficult, it is not always easy to sustain hope for things to turn out well. I'm certain that many who are currently suffering from the personal impact of COVID-19 do not find it easy to hope.

And then there is the practice of love, that most complicated of spiritual commandments. If it is not disciplined and informed by discretion, it can lead us into all manner of trouble, despite the romance and idealism of Valentine's Day.

All of the struggles to remain faithful, hopeful and loving, are conditioned by the sobering fact that we live in the world, where our vision is imperfect, and we are fraught with human limitations. And so, there are times of trial and tribulation, when faith is drenched in doubt; hope is swallowed up in despondency, and love is shipwrecked.

Yet in this fallen state, this state of unknowing, we move forward with all the human courage we can muster, because we decide to remain faithful. We are convinced we are supported by God's grace, through the gifts of faith, hope, and love; certainty into an uncertain future, but a future guided by God's providence, a providence that promises to finally make all things well, even though that wellness is often outside our immediate comprehension.

But as well, there are times of transformation in our spiritual journey, when faith is assured, we feel the presence of hope, and love travels down it most fulfilling path. There are times when everything is clear and we are taken up into an experience filled with light - when our lives too, are transfigured, and we experience life's true significance and purpose.

Yet like the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning, these assurances can be fleeting.

Despite the disciple's experience of the transfiguration, we like them, continue on our pilgrimage with this mixed benediction, of blessed assurance on the one hand, and human questioning on the other. This was also the experience of Jesus himself. (Pause)

In this context of living the Christian Way, what does the story of the transfiguration have to offer us?

The story itself is a vision granted to the three disciples, and offered to us, a story full of certainly, purpose and meaning; a story that testifies to the identity of Jesus and to a spiritual reality beyond human comprehension, a story where all the shadows of human existence fall away.

It is of course rare for us to have the fulness of this experience in the world. Only the mystics seem to know it. Yet this experience was granted to Peter, James and John, simple Galilean folk in this morning's Gospel.

We can only imagine what that experience was like for them.

The poet Edwin Muir has the disciples question the experience:

Was it a vision? / Or did we see that day the unseeable / One glory of the everlasting world.

This is a story that is "out of this world", in that it provides the participants an experience unbound by human limitation. It is depicted as a landscape where past, present, and future are gathered up into eternity. (Pause)

I would like us to lean more into the story this morning, and to use our imagination through the aid of a poet, Malcolm Guite. In his poetic representation of the experience, we can sense that we too are invited into an eternal space where -

For that one moment, 'in and out of time', / On that one mountain where all moments meet, / The daily veil that covers the sublime in darkling glass, fell dazzled at his feet. / There were no angels full of eyes and wings / Just living glory full of truth and grace. (*The Feast of the Transfiguration by Malcolm Guite*)

Liturgically the story is a vision of redeemed reality. It is meant as a lamp to help us see our way through life's challenges. Peter speaks to this purpose, in his own commentary on the transfiguration, in his Second Epistle,

"So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

It is true that the experience of Transfiguration presented in the Gospel of Mark this morning is rare. But I would suggest that we are all destined for transformation and transfiguration. I have recently learned something of this grace filled potential .

A few weeks ago, I lost a dear friend, a friend of over fifty years, a friend who I visited every year since I was 17 years old. He was sometimes a difficult friend, but loyal, intimate and loving. He was a profoundly committed Christian. He was also sometimes filled with a multitude of anxious feelings that we all experience in the midst of life. Shortly after he died his son wrote me. In his letter he describes his father's dying, a dying that was to my mind, a type of transfiguration.

Over the last few days, Dad, . . . , was clearly at peace Despite his discomfort, his moments of happiness were real and palpable, and his smiling face . . . beamed up at us during the abundance of wonderful moments he shared with us, "I've heard people talk about how the final hours can be "joyous," and I have always retained some measure of skepticism about that, and even some aversion to the word, but despite our grief, our last hours with Dad were joyous. . . . As weak as he was, his face lit up, . . . It was really, really wonderful to see him so happy. When the moment came, Dad showed not the tiniest hint of fear or doubt. His resolve and faith were absolute. He was, in fact, I believe, in a state of happy anticipation.