



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Vision of the Transfiguration

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 2, 2014

The Last Sunday After The Epiphany—Based on Matthew 17:1-9

It was during the latter part of Jesus' travelling ministry that something happened. Something that breaks most every box that I can think of to try to "explain" it to you. For what happened is so expansive, so dramatic, so off the grid of common experience, that it can be really alienating to even bring up this story, let alone dwell on it. But today I'm going to try to unpack this event that we call the Transfiguration. An event that happened with Jesus and a few of his disciples on a mountain in Galilee.

Believe me, it would make things much simpler to just bracket this event off and move on to the more so-called "historical" events of Jesus' life and pretend this event didn't matter much, because it is so unbelievable to a certain way of thinking.

But if you are travelling on the Way with Jesus, the path takes you to this mountain. This experience is featured in three of the Gospels, and also in one of the letters of the early church. It's not going away. And to put it another way, if you are going to come to this church, you have to face the event of the Transfiguration. For we have enshrined this event in a great golden mosaic above our altar, a giant window to the truth of God as we see it.

If you are going to be a part of the community of St. Bart's, there is no avoiding the Transfiguration, there's no shoving this under the carpet. In a way, every Sunday is the Feast of the Transfiguration at St. Bart's.

And I think this is a good thing. Because, as odd as it is, as difficult to explain as it is, the Transfiguration goes to the heart of what Jesus is doing in the world: revealing the spiritual and interior reality that flows like a mighty river through his life and ours if we let it.

To begin, let me be clear that the Transfiguration is a vision, not magic. It might read like magic, but it is not. Visions are part of our world, and not only religious ones. If you stop to think about it, visions are the mysterious things that are behind nearly everything in the world that people have done and made. So don't say I'm a kook for believing some of them.

Visions are given to those who see things that are hidden, but are just as real, or could be real. It could be the vision of an architect of a great structure. The vision of the founder of a school. The vision of a couple for their future life together. The vision of a nation yet to be born. The vision of an economist of a new currency. The vision of a movie director for an epic trilogy that will become a classic.

But the visions don't need to be as grand as that. It could be the vision of serenity that a person can get from watching a sunset on a beach, or the vision of possibility that one can get from looking out from the top of a skyscraper.

Some visions are for one person or a select few. Some are for the entire world. Some are of heaven and earth and how they interact. Some visions die. Some visions live on to be made real. Some are visions of lies that are made real. But others are visions of truth and beauty and love.

Now these are the best visions you want to have. These are the ones that the Church seeks to proclaim and magnify. The real visions. The true ones that start out floating in the sky and in the mind and in the abstract, but that then descend and end up grounded on earth and in the flesh and in the world as we live it. The Real Visions that have a shot of being on Earth as they are in Heaven.

For the vision we are celebrating today, the Transfiguration—or in Greek the Metamorphosis—Jesus only invites three of his disciples, three fishermen: the brothers, James and John of Zebedee, and Simon Peter. I don't know if it

was a sign of favoritism or a sign that these were the disciples of most concern. James and John could be heard on the road shamelessly bickering over who would be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom, all the while having no idea what troubling kind of kingdom Jesus was establishing. And Peter was the one who protested when Jesus announced that he would have to go to Jerusalem and be killed and be raised up. Peter was the one to whom Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan." And so, I imagine Jesus wanted these disciples in particular to have some more clarity, for they were so close to the truth and yet so far.

And so he invites them on a kind of mountain retreat. Away from the crowd. Away from the zeal and the frenzy of the world. They hike up Mount Tabor together, and they make it to the top of the great rock, where so much of Galilee can be seen, so much of God's promised land, so much of heaven's vault.

They catch their breath, and their gaze soon turns to Jesus, their teacher and their friend. Perhaps he has something to tell them. But, to their surprise, they see him in a new light. The light is not shining on him; rather they see the light coming from him. He is the source somehow. His humble robe shines too, brighter than any royal garment. This light had always been there, but now it isn't hidden anymore.

On this mountain, Jesus has undergone a kind of change, like the way that Moses shone when he came down another mountain, Mount Sinai, after his encounter with the divine. And somehow, Moses is there. The one who had led the people out of slavery, and given them a law to guide them in holiness. He is somehow present with them, engaging with Jesus.

There is another person too! The great prophet, Elijah, who had saved their people from idolatry and who, in his small cave at the end of his troubled life, found God not in the thunder or in the earthquakes, but in the still, small voice within.

Both Elijah and Moses are talking to Jesus. But, actually, they always had been in conversation with Jesus. Yet now this conversation is not hidden anymore; it is revealed for them to see.

Peter takes this as a prime opportunity to take all this momentum in a fresh direction, to avoid their journey to Jerusalem. "What a wonderful thing this is!" he says. "Let's stay here. We can build three temples, one for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah. Like the Samaritans on Mt. Gerazim, we can have our own mountain, our own Temple (three of them, in fact). There's no need to take on the people on the Temple Mount of Jerusalem. No need to risk a bloody confrontation. How about a fresh start here, Jesus? On our own terms. On our own mountain!"

But the only answer is an interruption. A great bright cloud surrounds them, and they hear a voice saying that Jesus is God's own child, and that they should listen to him. What is so striking is that the disciples aren't afraid until this very moment. This is when they cower. This is when they fall to the ground in horror. When the vision assures them that Jesus knows what he is talking about, that they actually should listen to him. That his foolish talk about going to the lions' den, to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, the city that instead of having him exalted between two heroes will have him hanging between two thieves. This talk isn't foolish at all, but inspired by the great march of God's work in the world, at least since Moses and Elijah. The vision gives the dreadful and blessed assurance that he must go to the Holy City, to the home of many enemies, and yet to the very place where he can do the most good.

The cloud lifts, the voice stops, and all that is left is them and Jesus. All that glory is hidden again. Was it ever there? And their Rabbi leads them down from the mountaintop retreat, asking them not to fear as they make their way together ever closer to the heart of the matter, so that his work, God's work, may be fulfilled. So that in the sight of all, upon the Temple mount, Jesus might act as God acts, love as God loves, come what may.

But there will come a time when all people—the authorities, his closest friends, and even Jesus himself—will feel as if God has forsaken Him. What you see in the vision of the Transfiguration is a kind of assurance and confirmation that the shame and ugliness that is coming for Jesus in Jerusalem is actually a kind of beauty and a kind of glory that even the people closest to Jesus will have a hard time perceiving while it is happening. But afterwards, come Easter, come Pentecost, it will become all too vivid for them, and the fire of his Spirit will circle the globe till kingdom come.

This is where the vision of the Transfiguration could take us, if we sit with it. And today is a good day to do that, to celebrate this vision of hidden glory right before we enter into the comparatively dark season of Lent: a time of stark self-examination; a time of giving up things that God knows we shouldn't be doing; a time to pursue more rigor in our disciplines of virtue, to try to establish some holy habits that might stick this time. If we really go for it, forty days and forty nights, Lent is ugly, by design. It reveals so much about who we really are and how far we have to go. Like Jesus' indomitable journey to Jerusalem, it's hard to be encouraged by the experience of Lent, whether you pull it off or not.

But something we can all take away from the vision of the Transfiguration is that in it we see revealed that life with God is beautiful and glorious, even though living it out may look like the exact opposite to the naked eye. With eyes of the Spirit, even crosses have some beauty to bear.

We also can take away from this vision that with Christ we are grounded in the past with all the holy people who have come before us, a great cloud of witnesses, holy guides and holy prophets, our lineage of visionaries.

And just like the disciples had to leave the comfort and safety of their vision, we too have to leave the comfort and safety of this church every Sunday, our own orchestrated vision of glory. But that we can leave this comfort in trust that we can weather the storms of our lives, fortified by our ancient and common vision of a way of living and loving in the world that darkness and the grave cannot overcome.

The Transfiguration is our vision of loving one another, enduring to the end, come what may. As one of Peter's friends wrote in the letter we read today, "We would do well to be attentive to this vision as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

