

Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration

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I sort of pride myself on never forgetting a face. Names? Not so much. Faces? Faces are imprinted on me. But last year I flew to Brooklyn for a friend's 60th birthday. This man walked up, gave me a hug, and said, "Hey, Wesley!" like we'd known each other forever. I looked him right in the eyes... and absolutely nothing. My mind went completely blank. So I did what any self-respecting priest would do. I smiled, hugged him back, pretended I knew exactly who he was, waited until he walked away, then made a beeline for my friend and whispered, "Who was that?" He told me his name, and instantly it all came back. It was someone I'd known well years before. Later I learned he'd gotten sober. And the strange thing was this: it wasn't that his face had changed. His face was the same. But his countenance... his countenance had been transformed. Has this ever happened to you? Maybe it was someone who had fallen in love. Maybe someone in recovery. Maybe someone after surviving grief. Maybe someone after discovering who they really were. They were the same person. And yet somehow, they weren't. Or maybe it's more accurate to say they had finally become more themselves than ever before. I think about that because our brains are meaning-making machines. We expect people to remain the people we've always known. Familiarity helps us feel safe. So when someone changes in a profound way, even for the better, it can surprise us. Sometimes it can even unsettle us.

The disciples knew Jesus better than almost anyone. They had walked and laughed and eaten with him. Listened to him. Prayed with him. And then one day they looked at his face...and suddenly everything was different. Or maybe nothing was different at all. Maybe, for one breathtaking moment, they simply saw what had always been true. That's what the Feast of the Transfiguration is really about. Not Jesus becoming someone else. But the truth of who he has always been suddenly becoming visible. His face shines. His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear beside him, bearing witness that the Law and the Prophets find their fulfillment in Jesus. A cloud overshadows the mountain. And a voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." It's an overwhelming scene. And Peter, bless his heart, does what so many of us do when confronted with mystery. He wants to make meaning and build something. 3 dwellings. 3 shrines. 3 monuments. Let's preserve this moment. Let's keep it here. Let's stay on the mountain. It's such a wonderfully human response. Lord knows I know what that feels like. But glory doesn't stay on mountaintops. It always sends us back down into our ordinary lives. So this moment of glory is not an escape from the world. It's about seeing the world differently. It is a revelation of who Jesus is and of the costly love by which he will save the world. The disciples are not the first people in Scripture to be startled by a shining face. Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, and his face is radiant from having been in the presence of God. The remarkable thing is that Moses doesn't even know it. Other people see the change before he does. Before we do. My therapist once said to me during a Zoom session, "Look at your face. It's different." I hadn't noticed. But she had. Our faces carry our stories. Scripture knows this. Moses' face shines. Jesus' face shines. Scripture is full of lives being changed, renamed, and called forth into deeper truth: Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter. Again and again the story of God is the story of lives being changed by grace, of hidden glory becoming visible. Even our deaths are not the end of the story. We

believe that death itself becomes a kind of transfiguration. Not an ending. A passage. A crossing. Another threshold.

Our transgender siblings have taught us something profound. They remind us that sometimes the deepest work of a human life is allowing our truest selves to become visible. That revelation can be costly. That becoming visible requires courage. That authenticity matters. Yes, the Transfiguration of Jesus is different in countless ways. And yet it also tells us this: God delights in revealing truth. Not hiding it. "This is my Son, my Chosen." The deepest truth isn't created on that mountain. It is revealed there. And maybe that's true of us as well. Maybe holiness isn't becoming someone entirely different. Maybe holiness is becoming more fully who God has always known us to be.

Today also happens to be Founder's Day here at Calvary. 194 years. That's amazing. Some of you know that there is a legendary history of this parish titled *The Great Book*. I love that. We Christians call the Bible the Good Book. But around Calvary apparently our 994-page parish history is called *The Great Book*. It's just so good. My grandmother used to say, "I pity the dog that won't wag its own tail." In other words, don't be ashamed to celebrate what is good. And we should celebrate. We should celebrate 194 years of ministry. We should celebrate generations of faithful people. We should celebrate glorious music and courageous leadership. Children baptized and Saints buried. Lives transformed. But we also have to tell the truth about our complicated history, our dark past, our complicity in the sin of slavery. That belongs to us too. Even the beauty we inherited is not innocent of history. But if Calvary has any true greatness, it has never been found in bricks or stained glass. It has always been found in ordinary people encountering the living Christ. Hearts changed by grace. Lives shaped by forgiveness, recovery, courage, and vocation. That's why this place matters. The miracle of our lives is that when we spend enough time in the presence of Christ, little by little, almost without noticing, our faces begin to tell the same story. They shine with the reflected light of Christ. And today we will see it again, because two children will come to these waters. Baptism does not make them beloved. They already are. Baptism is the Church saying out loud what has always been true: You belong to Christ. You are God's beloved. You bear the image of God. You carry within you a spark of divine light.

And so once more we are reminded that there is transfiguration everywhere. But we dare not stop there. Because Glory doesn't stay on mountaintops. We come back down with Jesus, because there are people waiting for someone to bear the light of Christ into their lives. Beloved, what would a transfigured Memphis look like? What would a transfigured world look like? It would look like justice and mercy. Hungry children fed. Wars ended. Young Black men living to grow old. Dignity honored. Beloved community made visible. This is our mission, the Church's mandate. And I believe that with my whole heart. And that's why I keep insisting something that some people find surprising. I am convinced that there has never been a better time to be the Church. Never. Because our mission has never been clearer. Not to imitate the culture. Not to withdraw from the culture. But to transfigure the culture. To become a community where the light of Christ is so visible that other people begin to recognize themselves as beloved too. To become people whose faces shine. So perhaps the question we are left with this morning isn't *Have I changed?* But, *What is God revealing in me? What hidden light is waiting to shine? What part of God's image in me is longing to become visible?* The living Christ is still transfiguring this church, this city, this world. Our very hearts. And today, at baptism, as precious children come to this fount of every blessing, we will witness the Church proclaim again what God has been saying from the very beginning: *You are my beloved.*