***Transfigurations***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 2, 2025*

*based on Luke 9:26-38*

If you’re like me you are alert for signs of spring. I mean, we all need something to cheer us regularly. In the Fall we marvel at the color of the leaves, how they "turn." But botanists tell us that the color that is revealed in autumn leaves is really there all through the entire growing season.

The natural color of the leaf is disguised spring and summer by the action of the chlorophyll which causes the leaves to *appear* green. When the action of the chlorophyll eventually declines the real color of the leaf is revealed. The *real* color is revealed when the green goes away.

Something like that happens in the transfiguration of Jesus, the festival we celebrate today. At least, it’s a botanical equivalent of the theology behind this Biblical story. Tradition tells us that his disciples saw Jesus as he really was. For the first time they saw his true colors. A veil was removed and they were terrified by his essential holy aspect.

Here’s the irony of it. Jesus’ disciples have been getting a glimpse of this every day but haven’t yet processed it. Watching him operate, they’ve seen his uncanny ability to love and accept everyone on their own terms. It’s is so striking. It’s as if no one has ever seen anything to equal it.

“Could he be sent from God?” they wonder. It’s his essential goodness that transfixes them, which is disarming because he never demands their attention. The gospel writer, Mark, says that just walking along among them he “filled everyone with awe.”

He never assumes power, you know, like an emperor would. His power is not about might. His is totally a moral power.

Could he be the true human being; the best of us? The *not-*emperor? That’s what they wonder.

The apostle Paul understood this totally. He describes what the gospel writers point to in Jesus’ transfiguration better than anyone. It’s found in his letter to the Philippians written very late in his life. He has a very high understanding of the incarnation so he uses poetic language to describe it.

*Though he [Jesus] was in the form of God,
        he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
        taking the form of a slave
         becoming a human being.*

 *Finding himself in human form**he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
        even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
        and gave him a name above all names. (Philippians 2:6-9)*

This is what the Christ part of Jesus is supposed to be; a self-emptying; a willingness to identify with a slave, the lowest of the low on earth. God honors him for that, according to Paul.

So, before I continue unpacking this holy moment, let me offer this aside about the implications of what Jesus’s power is and is not.

Most Friday evenings I catch the analysis offered by David Brooks and Jonathan Capehart on the PBS Newshour. I don’t have the heart to follow everything that’s coming down from Washington exhaustively. But I find this weekly capsule from the Newshour something I can digest.

Anyway, two nights ago I was struck dumb by the way the more conservative of the two journalists, David Brooks, summed up the meeting of our President, Vice President and Ukraine President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in the Oval Office on Friday.

What Brooks said showed us just how totally opposite our current nation’s leadership is, morally speaking, from that of Jesus as revealed in the Paul’s understanding in his letter to the Philippians. Here’s what David Brooks said …

*All my life, I have had a certain idea of about America, that we're a flawed country, but we're fundamentally a force for good in the world, that we defeated Soviet Union, we defeated fascism, we did the Marshall Plan, we did PEPFAR to help people live in Africa. And we make mistakes, Iraq, Vietnam, but they're usually mistakes out of stupidity, naivete and arrogance. They're not because we're ill-intentioned.*

*What I have seen over the last six weeks is the United States behaving vilely, vilely to our friends in Canada and Mexico, vilely to our friends in Europe. And today was the bottom of the barrel, vilely to a man (the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy) who is defending Western values, at great personal risk to himself and his countrymen.*

*Donald Trump believes in one thing. He believes that might makes right. And, in that, he agrees with Vladimir Putin that they are birds of a feather. And he and Vladimir Putin together are trying to create a world that's safe for gangsters, where ruthless people can thrive. And we saw the product of that effort today in the Oval Office… I first started thinking … am I feeling grief? Am I feeling shock, like I'm in a hallucination? But I just think shame, moral shame. It's a moral injury to see the country you love behave in this way. (PBS Newshour, February 28, 2025)*

Yesterday, the leaders of every free nation in the world did their best to reach out to Ukraine and, at the same time, back away from us. The only friends we have now are in nations ruled by despots: Russia and, what, Hungary? And those “friends,” their laughing at us behind our back.

Who could have imagined?

Okay, back to Jesus’s holy moment. This story comes up just before the season of Lent every year. A couple of years ago I spoke about the idea of “thin places” in reference to this text.

If that’s a familiar term for you, you might remember that the Irish revel in such moments. They like to imagine spirits who are said to appear to those attentive enough to look for them. These are places that exist beyond geography and also beyond time.

Ancient peoples saw *high* places, like mountain tops, as locations where the standard rules of flat-footed living do not pertain anymore and everything is up for grabs.

I’m talking about places where the eternal and the temporal are believed to sometimes meet.

In the book of Genesis, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, has a dream where he sees angels coming up and going down a ladder joining heaven and earth and he wakes in terror and wonder, and says, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

As I say, ancient people took for granted that such “thin” places exist, , but you know, our contemporaries sometimes have similar experiences. Maybe even some of us here, as well.

Biblical interpreter, Tom Long tells the following story about waking to such fleeting wonder …

*One day, when my daughter was a little girl, she was dancing playfully in our living room. I was on the couch trying to read the newspaper, but her whirling motion captured my attention. I watched her spin, her arms spread wide and her hair tossing as she twirled across the room. Suddenly the way her mouth was fixed, the manner in which her hair fell across her cheeks, and the play of sunlight through the curtains on her face created an unusual effect. For one instant she looked not five years old, but twenty-five. There was a single fixed frame in her motion in which I saw her, not as a child, but as the grown up woman she would become. Then she turned, the light changed, her face broke in to a grin, and she was a child again. But I had seen what I had seen, and there was no escaping it. It was a wonderful moment, and a frightening one as well." (Thomas Long in Shepherds and Bathrobes CCS 1987)*

*I had seen what I had seen, and there was no escaping it.*

So, why is Jesus revealed in his full glory here at this point in his ministry?

Well, shortly before this moment in Luke’s gospel, Peter has a revelation and answers Jesus question, “Who do you say that I am?” with the following words, "You are God’s messiah.”

You’d think such language, such a revelation, might mark the final confirmation of who Jesus is; that no holy moment that followed would surprise Peter. But that turns out to not be the case.

Peter, according to Luke, is flabbergasted by the story of Jesus turning a holy white during his transfiguration. He doesn’t have the language or theology to process it.

For Peter, it was a moment that transcended his confession. That confession marked a moment of theological clarity, maybe, but theology means little compared with an actual encounter with the holy. There are no words to express what happens at such moments.

Reflecting on it Peter could have said, like Tom Long, *I had seen what I had seen, and there was no escaping it.*

You know, I can honestly say I know the feeling. It came for me 25 years ago when I visited Jerusalem for the first and only time. I had visited lots of (quote) “holy places” on that trip.

In the days preceding Jerusalem our tour bus had taken us to Nazareth, Bethlehem, and the Mount of Transfiguration, as well. While I was impressed with these sites, nothing particularly moved me. But on this particular day when we had arrived in Jerusalem we visited the church of the Holy Sepulcher. I will tell you, nothing in my life before prepared me for what happened inside me at that ancient spot. Have I mentioned this before in a previous sermon or class?

I have no idea what actually transpired, but when we came to the place inside the church where the huge greenish solid rock the ancient Romans used for crucifixion was (right there inside the church) I was suddenly filled with a kind of awe and fear I’d never known before or since.

Nothing I’ve experienced compares with the sustained waves of … whatever it was that came over me and would not leave me, until I finally left the place.

I cannot account for it, nor can I even describe it – I can only say, I had experienced what I had experienced and there was no escaping it.

I can tell you that when I sink into purely secular thinking and lose track of the spiritual all I have to do is remember that day and recollection of that holy fear transports me.

I wonder if the gospel writer, Luke, is trying to say to us that the frightening encounter Peter, James and John have on the mount of Transfiguration is meant to have a similar effect.

I wonder if Luke understands it as a gift meant to get them through the next hard patch they will face as they accompany Jesus to Jerusalem and go through what they will have to go through with him there at Jesus’ passion.

Maybe this bit of terrifying wonder is a special grace.

In closing, let me tell you about an experience a late friend of mine from Michigan had once. Her name was Diet (“Deet”) Eman. She lived to be 99.

Born in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1920, she and her fiancé, Hein Seitsma, began hiding Jews in 1940 right after the Nazis occupied Holland. I know this not only because she co-wrote a book I read about her experiences, but also because the church I served in Ashland twice hosted her for a week when I was pastor there.

We brought her in to tell her story to us but also so she could tell it in our local schools. That kind of truth telling about history is so important. I mean, sad to say, 20% of Americans say they aren’t sure the Holocaust even happened.

But this is not why I am telling you her story this morning. I am telling you this because Diet once had a holy vision. She told me that had she and her fiancé, Hein, known the war was going to last 6 years, not 6 months they may never have gotten involved.

They hid Jews with rural Dutch families. Then they had to forge ration cards and I.D.s for these people. It was full-time work and harrowing too. They even helped a number of downed allied pilots get back to England.

Well, one day she and Hein met for a picnic lunch somewhere out in the country. They rode their bikes separately to meet. It was 1944. During lunch Diet said she felt a premonition come over her. She heard something deep within her say, "You better take a good look at him."

So, she followed the voice and did that. It startled Hein who asked what she was doing.

“I’m just looking at you,” she said. After their lunch without knowing it, they rode out of one another’s lives. Both were arrested soon after. Hein did not survive the war. He died at Dachau.

After the war Diet married but the marriage was not a happy one. Hein Seitsma was the love of her life.

“You better take a good look at him” said the voice.

"This is my beloved son,” said the voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration. “Listen to him."

To all of us sometime in life or several times, maybe, comes the admonition: Look! Listen! Be aware. Take a good long look at those kids (those grandkids). There is something there sustaining; fleeting, beautiful, holy and life giving.

Jesus is remembered to have said, "Behold the lilies."

Such awareness is meant to get us through times like these. They have to.

Amen