

“Being Grateful for Holy Places and Holy Faces”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2014
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Holy Scriptures: Exodus 24: 12-18 Matthew 17: 1-9

Exodus 24:12-18

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud

overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Wonder

A three-year-old stops on the sidewalk to squat low and stare face to face with a frog.

Two preschoolers chortle as they splash and stomp in mud puddles.

During a Little League baseball game a line drive was hit to right field.

The boy in right field made no effort to catch the ball.

After the inning was over the coach asked him what happened.

The boy opened his mitt to reveal a tiny caterpillar.

"If I had caught the ball," he said earnestly,

"my new little friend might have been hurt."

Last month when our fair city was blanketed with two inches of snow,

the church lawn became a popular site for sledding.

The next day when I arrived here

the proof of family frivolity was there for the world to see:

tracks and footprints crisscrossed the lawn;

left behind scarves and mittens;

a cheap plastic sled in pieces;
two snowmen bookended our Chalice Thrift banner
and one waved at passersby from beside the
church marquee.

This past Wednesday as our Bell Choir ringers entered the church
to rehearse

a gaggle of five and six-year-olds exited from their Spring
Into Spanish class.

They happily rolled on the grass near the parking lot.

A girl collected two heaping handfuls of grass clippings
and gleefully threw them all over the other children.

Two mothers quickly scooped up their young charges,
fussing loudly about the possibility of dirt and grass
staining their car seats.

Wonder

Live with a sense of awe.

Wonder now. Wonder how. Wonder wow.

Admire and smell the roses.

Enjoy the extravagance, the abundance, the blessedness
of God's creation and one another, right now, while you
still can.

Rejoice in the holiness that shines in faces and welcomes us into
holy spaces.

You can't box it, or preserve it, or take it with you.

Live in the moment; be totally present in the wonder years...and
wonderful moments.

Jesus did, and he encouraged his disciples to do the same.

*Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John
and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.*

*And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became
dazzling white.*

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

The disciples become caught up and swept away
by the majesty and mystery of the moment.
They are moved to the depth of their souls
and recognize that they were on holy ground.
Peter was so wrapped up in the moment he felt he had to say something.

Then Peter said to Jesus,

*“Lord, it is good for us to be here;
if you wish, I will make three dwellings here,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for*

Elijah.”

While he was still speaking,

suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this,

they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

But Jesus came and touched them,

saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Jesus’ followers Peter, John and James knew the human side of Jesus.

They enjoyed being in his presence as teacher, as counselor, as friend.

Now that they had seen the Transfiguration of Jesus,

his face aglow with his love of God the Creator, suddenly they saw

“...the holiness of the man shining through his

humanness,

*his face so afire with it they were almost
blinded.”*

(Frederich Buechner,
Transfiguration)

The Apostle Paul spoke of our own spiritual capacity to be transfigured when he said,

*“And all of us, with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a
mirror,*

*are being transformed into the same image
from one degree of glory to another;
for this comes from the Lord,
the Spirit.”*

Frederick Buechner said:

“Even with us something like that happens once in a while.

The face of a man walking his child in the park,

[the face] of a woman picking peas in the garden,

*of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a
concert, say,*

*or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves
roll in,*

*or just having a [cold drink] at a Saturday
baseball game in July.*

Every once and so often,

something so touching, so incandescent, so alive

*transfigures the human face that it’s almost beyond
bearing.”*

Bill Keane’s “Family Circus” shows us a little girl. her face aglow, rushing to tell her mother that, “*The school nurse checked through everyone’s hair to make sure they didn’t have any headlights.*”

Wonder

The light of God's love shone on Jesus' face, and through him to us.

Epiphany culminates today

and sets the stage for the Season of Lent.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, our spiritual prelude to the Passion of the Spirit.

From this day forward Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem and the cross;

may we journey with him, in wonder and deep humility.

As you may well know, this story of Christ and his disciples' mountaintop experience

is so memorable it is re-told in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 2nd Peter.

(Mt 17.1—8; Lk 9.28—36; 2 Pet 1.16—18)

In the Gospel versions, immediately after the Transfiguration,

as Jesus comes down from the mountain

he is met by the father of a boy

who suffered from seizures and convulsions.

Jesus calls for the boy to be brought before him.

He casts out the demon and heals him.

This is what the wonderful power of love can do.

Wonder

Jesus looks at us and loves us.

Jesus looks at his people,

His children in the batays of Haiti,

His children in the cities of the Sudan, Ukraine, and Rio.

His children in McMansions and in crumbling

homes.

His children who know his name

and those who have yet to learn of

the love of God.

Jesus looks on all His children, and all are loved.

May he look upon the world today,

cast out the demons that seize and separate us,
that dull our sense of wonder,
the demons that make us dumb and deaf and blind to our
commonality,
and, in his abundant mercy, heal us all.

Wonder

Look to God and be glad.

Let your face reflect your faith that you have tasted and seen that
God is good.

Whenever your face glows,

God looks upon you and rejoices, saying,

*“This is my beloved child; listen to him! Listen to
her!”*

How often do we mask our true Self, our emotions, our thoughts,
our faith?

Why do you think it is that we remove our masks only in
unguarded moments?

Our faces project outward our feelings, communicating our love
and hope and passions.

In delivery rooms we let down our guard and our joy shines
through.

Some of the happiest phone calls we receive at the church

are from newly engaged couples

who inquire about getting married here in this holy space.

Joy and wonder are contagious.

Dare to take off your mask.

Take a risk, if you must, and allow God to use you, transfigure
you,

work out the Spirit’s purpose in you.

As Paul wrote: *"I appeal to you therefore...to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,*

holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world

but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.."(Romans 12:1-2)

Wonder

My Aunt Ginny collects pop-up books.

One book in her collection emphasizes people's fears.

Open the book and you are standing at a lectern in front of a church.

Turn the page and snakes leap out to the reader;

turn the page and you are atop a tall building looking down;

turn the page and you are in a packed elevator;

turn the page and you are sitting in a dentist's chair

looking up at a light;

turn the page and you are six feet down in a grave looking up.

Pretty scary; it's frightening to pick up a cute little pop-up book and come face to face with one's fears.

Of course, Aunt Ginny's book needed one more page,

one more pop-up to spring out and confront us with our greatest fear.

We fear our glory.

At his 1994 inauguration speech,

the late President Nelson Mandela quoted Marianne Williamson, saying:

"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate,

but that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us.

We ask ourselves,

Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking

so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.

It is not just in some; it is in everyone.

And, as we let our own light shine,

we consciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our fear,

our presence automatically liberates others."

What did Jesus say about this to the disciples? *"Get up and do not fear!"*

In his book Waking the Dead, John Eldredge

also speaks of our fear that we are powerful beyond measure;

he describes it as fearing our own glory as beings made in the image of God.

"We do fear our glory." Eldredge writes,

"The...reason we fear our own glory is that once we let others see it,

they will have seen the truest us, and that is nakedness indeed.

We can repent of our sin.

We can work on our "issues."

But there is nothing to be done about our glory.

It is an awkward thing to shimmer when everyone else around you is not,

to walk in your glory with an unveiled face

when everyone else is veiling his [or her] face.

“And that is why living from your glory is the only loving thing to do.

You cannot love another person from a false self.

You cannot love another while you are still hiding.

How can you help them to freedom while you remain captive?”

(John Eldredge. Waking the Dead. Page 87-88)

So let's flip this around into a positive, life-affirming message:

Love one another from your true Self.

Love one another with a sense of wonder and awe.

Love one another from glory into glory.

In Chicken Soup for the Soul,

the story is shared of a little girl who asks her parents for permission

to be left alone with her newborn sister.

They refuse, but she is persistent.

Finally they agree but secretly peek so they can oversee both children.

She walked up to the crib, looked in at her new sibling, and said,

“Tell me again what God is like; I'm starting to forget.”

May no one ever forget what God is like.

My friends, you know what God is like:

the love of God shines in and through you.

Go forth,

a God-inspired holy face to bless God's holy spaces with your presence.

You are wonder-full!

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!