
True Love's True Form

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
The Feast of the Transfiguration – Year A

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning and welcome to the Cathedral as we observe the Feast of the Transfiguration and hear the story of a mountain top gathering replete with sleep deprived disciples, saints of old, and a dazzling light show. It is a story guaranteed to mystify and enchant all ages, from children to those not quite so young. Vicky and I fall into the latter category, and now that we are grandparents of twins, we have been re-acquainting ourselves with children's films and books, many of which are, I suspect, meant for grownups too. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is experiencing a revival of sorts these days with Emma Watson as Belle, the benevolent bibliophile who learns to love the beast and sees the humanity hidden within his outward appearance. Current sociocultural critiques of the film notwithstanding, it is a film about a transfiguration of sorts, with Jungian archetypal themes of anima, animus, transformation, and the shadow selves we all contain. And if we use our imagination, we can see the glorious appearance of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus in this Lukan passage as being a little bit like the Beast's transfiguration at the end of the film, when he is lifted by mysterious forces and enveloped in light that erupts out from him at the moment of transformation. This is the stuff of Hollywood, of course, and the current iteration has been the highest grossing film of 2017. We do love stories about transformation.

But, really, the Transfiguration in Luke is NOT the same as the climax of the story in *Beauty and the Beast*. Rather, it's a little more like the moment Princess Fiona's true self is revealed in the film *Shrek*—another movie about transformation—filled with awe-inspiring light and dramatic music leading us to expect a *Beauty and the Beast*-style ending. Instead, *Shrek* subverts our expectations, like many of Jesus' parables. The light subsides to reveal "*true love's true form*," as the song goes, and we discover that true love's true form isn't one of conventional beauty and royalty, but rather one that makes Fiona perfectly suited for a life of companionship with Shrek in the swamp -- a life that the story teaches us has the potential for a lot more abundance and love than life in a palace.

So a central message in the story of Jesus' transfiguration in all three gospels is that the moment of dazzling glory comes not at the end of the gospel, but in the middle. It is not the climactic moment in which Jesus' true nature is decisively revealed for all to see. After the light show subsides (and in Luke, after the divine voice, proclaims Jesus as God's chosen), Jesus goes back to looking just as he has while they've been traveling around Galilee, teaching, healing, and setting people free from the powers that bound them and closed them off from community. The disciples tell no one of what they have seen. When the disciples are ready to proclaim their message to the world, at the very center of it will be a moment that

comes *much later in the story*, the moment in which Jesus' true nature is revealed and lifted up for any to see: Jesus' true nature will be revealed on the Cross. In verse 31, Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah appear in glory and speak of Jesus' "departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." The Greek word used for "departure" here is *exodus*. The connection between this Gospel text and the experience of Moses' descent from Sinai is made clear. And we heard both stories this morning.

The Disciples witnessed a vision, and wanted to stay atop the mountain forever. They could not. The author and theologian Henri Nouwen has said that the Transfiguration offers access through the gate of the visible—a very human Jesus—into the mystery of the invisible—the face of God. In this Gospel story, Jesus becomes a kind of luminous narrative—a living story, if you will, pointing to a wonderfully mysterious truth. Whatever happened on the mountain had to have meaning on level ground, that place where the sacred and profane meet in mundane everydayness. The disciples hear a voice from heaven saying "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" This repeats a common thread in the use of the term "beloved" and in the command to *listen*, to pay attention. And so with this the mountaintop experience comes to an end, and it is time to return to the everydayness of life, and a journey which may lead into unknown territory.

Begging the question, what might it mean to "practice Transfiguration," theologically understood, once one has descended the mountain? And keeping with two of the identified themes of this passage—those of light and of listening—how might this inform our practices of paying attention to the light of the Transfiguration in the everyday moments of our lives, and not just those occasional mountaintop experiences? Perhaps paradoxically, this may mean recognizing that in some way we, too, are to be bearers of that Light. The valley—and the road to Jerusalem that lay within it, is where Jesus continued his ministry. How do we embody our mountaintop experiences, including our journey into Christ in the Eucharist, once we have returned to the valley of day-to-day life to "*Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord*"? How do our disciplines and practices inform both our mountaintop experiences and life upon our return to level ground where we are called to see Christ in the face of the other, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Some time ago I journeyed with my two sons to the Northern Cascades for a mountaineering trip, the ultimate goal of which was to summit Mt. Baker. Or, so I thought. After several days of preparation, we departed our base-camp at 2:00am for the summit attempt. The night was clear and cold, and our team, roped together, ascended steadily. Each deliberate step brought us closer the hoped for sunrise on the summit of this jewel of the Cascades. Soon, however, lightning appeared off to the west as a line of powerful, pre-dawn thunderstorms announced a fast-moving cold front. In consultation with our wise guide, we made the group decision to return to camp, the wind, rain, and lightning close behind. I wanted the mountaintop, and I got a storm. I was disappointed, and later, in conversation with my sons, in which I voiced my regret, our older son, the most experienced mountaineer among us, he said something I'll never forget. "Dad, you never intentionally climb into a storm. That's mountaineering 101. We did the right thing." His wise younger brother nodded, and pointed toward the Roosevelt-Deming glacier glittering like a thousand jewels below us. We were together on an unforgettable adventure, and that was all that really mattered. What I remember most about the trip now, back in life on level ground, is not the fact that we did not summit, but that we created lifelong memories, and that our disciplines and practices led us to remember what was most valuable and important—our love for one another, being present, and fully alive. Like Peter, perhaps, who wanted to remain on the mountain top, I had to reconcile my return to level ground with a deeper awareness of the nature of the journey, a journey perhaps more ambiguous, and risky. The disciples would descend the mountain, but—and this is where our Mt. Baker narrative and this one part company—they would climb into a storm of life-changing proportions with Jesus in Jerusalem. Perhaps with Peter we are tempted to say "Let's stay on this mountain, and build huts here" when practicing Transfiguration on level ground may mean transformation and change beyond anything we had imagined. Sometime in the late 4th or early 5th century, St. Augustine preached a sermon on the nature of the Eucharist in which he said, "*Behold what you are...become what you receive.*" For Augustine the disciplines and practices of the sacraments are the occasion for both a deeper awareness of what one is, and a living into *what one might become* as one in the Body of Christ. The Transfiguration is, in part, a living into a sense of wonder about the mystery of such transformations. And so with Fiona, and Shrek, we learn that *true love's true form* may be found in the most surprising and life-giving ways. And with Augustine, and with Peter, James and John, we understand that in Christ we are created in the image of God, *Imago Dei*, and that God's love will follow us regardless of where we go. These are grace, and hope bountiful plenty to take with us down from the mountaintop, regardless of where our practices of transfiguration may take us. Amen.

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