

Transfiguration (RCL/B): “God [hearts] Us”
2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9
February 10-11, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I know this is not a popular point of view, **except** among the kids, but I love snow. I was thrilled a week or so ago when the long-range forecast was for temperatures dipping around Valentine’s Day and staying low long enough to give us a better-than-even chance of a good snowstorm. Now, a week later, ‘looks like we’re in for rain.

So I look back to the 4 years I spent in South Bend and the 10 years I spent in Chicagoland, fondly remembering winters with a **lot** of snow. I don’t miss the subzero temperatures, days on end, but I **do** miss the snow. One of my Midwest memories is of a **giant** heart outlined in the snow on the grounds of Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, IL. I was a chaplain on the psych unit, and one of the young adult patients who was “suffering from” but also **enjoying** a manic episode, managed to get **many** cans of cherry Hi-C, which she used to outline a bright red Valentine’s heart in the snow. She brightened the day of her fellow psych patients and all the many **other** patients who had “rooms with a view” of that side of the multi-story hospital. Her artwork raised the spirit of staff and visitors, too. She created a Valentine that was impossible to miss.

Sometimes people make **huge** gestures that capture our attention. Sometimes **God** makes huge gestures, too. Maybe God thinks, “You can be kinda dense, sorta distracted, so I’m gonna show you something you can’t miss, can’t ignore.” For example, in today’s first lesson from 2 Kings (2:1-12), God gets Elisha’s attention by sending a fiery chariot to collect Elijah and whisk him off to Heaven. In today’s Gospel, God sends Elijah back to earth, along with Moses, to meet with Jesus, glorified, shining bright as the sun. Peter, James and John

look on bug-eyed, mouths open, gaping, astonished. When a very large voice speaks from a cloud, announcing *“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him”* (Mark 9:7c), St. Matthew says the disciples fall flat on their faces in fear. (I’m imagining a Hollywood version, the voice sounding like Mustafa speaking out of the clouds to Simba, James Earl Jones doing the voice-over.) The voice from Heaven very well could have added, **“Got your attention now??”**

You may have had a spiritual mountain-top experience in your own life, and if so I’d love to hear it. Hopefully none of us will exit this world without having at least one or two. Mini-mountain-top experiences come around more frequently, if we don’t let ourselves get totally distracted and over-occupied with mundane stuff. Sometimes folks at Wednesday 7 a.m. worship will say, *“Wasn’t that an amazing sunrise??”* Now there are midwinter days I arrive in the building before the sun has risen, but other days I think, *“How did I miss it??”* And maybe that is why I **didn’t** miss the sunrise on Friday morning, when I came back from walking Bear. There was a strange light, and as I looked across the street beyond our churchyard the sky was an amazing watercolor of Wedgewood blue and backlit, vibrant coral. I made a conscious decision to pause and watch it unfold. As the gorgeous coral color spread, I noticed how the black latticework of leafless tree branches made the whole scene that much more startlingly beautiful. And I thought, *“Thank You, Lord, for winter and bare branches.”* Much of the glory would have been lost if the trees were leafed out, hiding the sky.

It was memorable but fleeting beauty, over within five minutes. The glory that Peter, James and John saw was also short-lived. Peter did his best to capture it, extend it, freeze-frame it by suggesting he build booths for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. (It’s an odd little

detail that Bible scholars tell us is related to the tradition that the Feast of Tabernacles, “booths,” will be celebrated when the endtimes come and God’s Promised One arrives.) But part of the lesson of the Transfiguration is that after the mountain-top moments that fill our souls, we inevitably descend to base camp and then home again where most of life is lived. However, God intends for us to be transformed by what we’ve seen and experienced on the mountain-top. It’s no coincidence that every year we celebrate Transfiguration right before Ash Wednesday. The vision of glory, the glimpse of what St. Paul calls, “*light [shining] out of darkness,*” “*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,*” (2 Corinthians 4:6) is to **heart-en** us, **en-courage** us, inspire us (breathe the holy Breath of God into us), as we walk our Lenten journey toward Holy Week and Easter.

Madeleine L’Engle was an amazing author and woman of faith, a member of the Episcopal Church, who wrote for both children and adults. Some of you may know her fantasy/sci-fi trilogy, *A Wrinkle in Time, The Wind in the Door, A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. (Great gift idea for the young bookworms in your lives!) In a spiritual collection of meditations called *Glimpses of Grace* she wrote this poem about the Transfiguration:

Suddenly they saw him the way he was,
the way he really was all the time,
although they had never seen it before,
the glory which blinds the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible. This is how
He was: radiant, brilliant, carrying joy
like a flaming sun in his hands.
This is the way he was – is – from the beginning,
and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself,
[came as a man to us]; and there on the mountain
they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.
We all know that if we really see him, we die.
But isn’t that what is required of us?
Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.¹

You may remember from the Old Testament, Hebrew Scripture, the belief that anyone who sees God will die. It's why God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers Moses' face with the divine hand when God passes by in Exodus 33 (verse 22). Madeleine L'Engle isn't saying anyone is literally going to die if they see Jesus in His true light. She's referring to what Jesus Himself said to those closest to Him, when He first announced His upcoming Passion and death:

"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

Anyone who picks up a cross is headed to Calvary, like Jesus. There aren't nails awaiting us, not literal dying (in most cases), but a **dying to self** that puts our God's commands before our personal desires, our neighbor's welfare over our own convenience.

How big does God need to draw the heart in the snow or elsewhere to get our attention? How magnificent does sunrise or sunset have to be, how intense the rainbow in the sky, how beautiful the birdsong, how inspiring the Scripture, how loud does God's voice have to be for us to hear, *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him"*?

How overt, how **obvious** does our neighbor's need have to be for us to **recognize** and **serve** Christ in our neighbor? What does the human face of Jesus look like? Turn and see the other folks in the pews today or perhaps the other people in the room or the people outside your window as you watch this livestream. In each one you see the human face of Christ, not transfigured and shining like the sun, but a true image nonetheless, the "look" He now prefers. If we see through the eyes of faith we recognize Him also in the simple and extraordinary gifts, the familiar and mystical gifts of consecrated Bread & Wine, Holy Communion with our Lord and with each other. Those who come often to the Table recognize not only our Lord Jesus' Body & Blood, but the gifts they contain: life, forgiveness,

salvation. The sacrament is a huge gesture in deceptively simple form, God speaking very loudly in a whisper. There's no better food to nourish us on our Lenten journey than this Holy Supper, the meal of the baptized. Maybe if you don't usually come weekly, you'll make weekend worship your Lenten "sacrifice" of time and effort (although I hate to use that word; how big a "sacrifice" is it to invest one hour in praising the One who sacrificed His life for us? Is it a "sacrifice" to receive a gift that includes forgiveness of our sins?). Maybe if you **do** worship every weekend, you'll consider adding Wednesday 7 a.m. Eucharist, or 12 noon Soup & Scripture at Manasquan Pres., or Lenten Wednesday soup supper and worship to your schedule of spiritual commitments. Our soul food is Word & Sacrament. There's no substitute.

Ash Wednesday is Valentine's Day. Picture the giant, bright red, Hi-C-outlined heart in the snow and in your mind's eye add the caption: "God is love." Jesus is God's Valentine to us. What's your valentine to God? Amen

¹Madeleine L'Engle, "Transfiguration" in *Glimpses of Grace*, p. 63.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham