

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, February 22, 2009
Lessons: Amos 5:6-15 and Mark 9:2-9

HAVING BEEN TO THE MOUNTAIN

The first time I wrote the opening to this sermon, it made its point quite graphically but without sympathy. I don't want to do it that way, with that tone; for one thing, we all share in this contradiction and it is not pleasant to face. We know we are creatures of flesh who age, get sick, and must endure the various indignities of being in the flesh. Religion has often sought to provide an escape from the body and all its physicality that limits us and, frankly, often embarrasses us. So, it might seem that "the Transfiguration of the Lord" is the high point of the gospels' inspiration. At last, we see Jesus away from the pressing crowds of unwashed bodies, away from the beggars squatting beside dusty roads and hoping for coins, away from the milky eyes of peasants blind from cataracts, the lepers, and the tainted women. Here at last on the mountain, it seems to the eye of religion that we see the truth hidden behind the veil of flesh: the majesty of the Son of God, the power, the glory.

But, no, that's not the truth at all. What we see on the mountain is not the real Jesus but only a vision to help us understand him. He is the one, the one in whom God is fully revealed to us as the God who loves this world and its people, who longs for our love in response, and who is irrevocably committed to us – to our salvation. But salvation from what? Is it from our humanity that Jesus has come to deliver us? No, the distress from which we need deliverance is our estrangement from God and from each other and our shame at being who we are as creatures of flesh. Because we are uncomfortable with who we are, we resist letting ourselves be known and loved. We are afraid to be human with each other and to be human with God. Instead, we strive for power over each other, and those who attain some measure of that power dress themselves more finely than the rest to show the world they are the people who matter, who are in charge, whose will must be done.

Why do we need the vision of transfiguration? We need visions when we would not recognize the real thing when we saw it. Visions show us truth in symbolic images we understand. What does glory look like? If you were an artist, you might use the splendor of light to suggest glory to people's minds. You might add a radiant countenance, a shining face. The vision of Jesus' transfiguration show us the glory hidden from our eyes but only in symbolic imagery. Jesus' true glory is incarnate, in-the-flesh of his own human body. God's Son has entered into the conditions of our humanity and taken on the limits of our creaturehood. Beyond even that, he united himself with poor people and sinners, with

outcasts and beggars. God's glory is not splendor but self-giving love, mercy, kindness, justice, and faithfulness.

The Bible makes it very clear that God takes no delight in power or majesty, no pleasure in the finery of kings and queens, no satisfaction in dominating people and pushing them around, and no gratification from being bowed down to. God does not have a human ego that needs to be fed and flattered. That's the emperor, the latest Caesar of whatever systems give mere human beings power and glory in this world. The financial wizards whose cleverness at manipulating the market and its systems were called "the masters of the universe," but now their foolishness and the poverty of their spirits have brought relentless suffering upon the world.

But we ourselves are not innocent. We who are called "the possessing peoples" of the earth shared in the spirit of economic triumphalism. The lower prices we have demanded for goods have exacted their toll in sweat shops and slave markets around the world. Countless people have lived poor and died young so we could buy cheap. Children have had their brains damaged by toxic fumes so our children could have the coolest sneakers. It has been calculated roughly that if all the world's people were to live at our level of consumption, we would require four or five more planet earths to sustain such a "standard of living," as we call it.¹ Is it not now time for us to realize we need to distinguish between our *standard of living* and our *level of consumption*, to make them two different things? If, as Jesus says, life is more than food and the body more than clothing, then surely a standard of living must be measured by something other than material goods possessed, earth's resources consumed, and other people's labor exploited for our comfort and pleasure.

I am not suggesting we start playing at being poor, to make ourselves feel better about having so much. We certainly could take some practical steps to reduce our consumption and waste, but this is a sermon, and so before asking, "How?" (which indeed we must get around to asking), we need to ask, "Why?" Is it not God's own design for this world that some should be blessed and enjoy plenty, while others deserve to be not-blessed and to suffer deprivation? Jesus says *No*, that is not God's will. Is it not by divine right that kings rule, ivy-educated people get rich, and power goes to some over others? Jesus says *No*, it is not by divine right. We need to discover or re-discover how Jesus defines "standard of living," and clearly his way differs from the prevailing norms.

The Transfiguration shows us symbolic glory to open our eyes to Jesus' glory as it really is, because otherwise we might miss it altogether. God's glory is demonstrated among us when Jesus touches a leper, forgives a sinner, or lifts a "mere woman" up to the stature of her humanity created in the image and likeness of God. God's glory happens on earth when enemies are reconciled and break the cycles of offense and revenge. It happens when we recognize other people's children as God's children like our own. It happens when

people are lifted from despair and when the stranger becomes a neighbor and the neighbor a sister or brother. It happens when someone with no resources to help nevertheless stays with another person in distress and shares in the experience of pain or dying.

Do we see? Flesh was not the veil hiding Jesus' glory. Our pretense to being more than human is the veil that hides the image of God for which we were created. In his book, *The Cross in Our Context*, the theologian Douglas John Hall describes the face-to-face meeting of Christianity's two very different forms. That encounter, which Hall labels "one of the most illuminating moments in all of Christian history, occurred early in the 13th Century. The supreme religious and political potentate of the day, the splendidly robed pontiff, Innocent III, received into his regal presence the poor man of God, plain brown-robed Francis of Assisi, who lived in the way Martin Luther would later describe as "not much loved": the way of humility and a mutuality of respect, service, and life – the way of the cross. After the death of Francis, his followers either turned back to the Christianity of power and glory or they were burned at the stake. To this day, those same two forms of Christianity exist side by side in the churches, and to this day, the humble way of Francis and of Jesus is "not much loved" in a world that worships power, prestige, and privilege."²

What we see in symbolic vision-form on the Mount of Transfiguration is revealed fully in real-life-form on the cross where Jesus gave himself to shame, torture, and death for our sake. It is self-giving love, an unlikely kind of glory, but it is God's kind. The question is which way will we follow? Will we fashion a Christ of power and prestige, a Christ of the privileged and successful, a Christ of the respectable and pure, a Christ who is not Jesus at all? Or will we seek the Christ who is Jesus, who does not merely assume his name but leads us in the way of the cross? This is a significant time right now, when the great are being somewhat humbled, when people are learning what it means to share, and when just maybe some of the formerly self-satisfied are more willing to ask what life is really all about. I am not saying we should look for ways to exploit people's fears and setbacks. I am suggesting we look anew for the ways of compassion, ministry, and service with mutuality instead of charity. This is the form of Christian faith that is not much loved, this way of the cross far less traveled. We need to take it, and we so we need to find out how to take it faithfully.

Mark tells us that when the vision passes, the disciples see only Jesus – sweat stained, dusty from the road, fully human Jesus on his way to give himself for an ungrateful world desperately in need of God's love. Amen.

1. Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, p. 51.
2. Hall, p. 75.