

Transfiguration of our Lord, C
Exodus 34:29-35
(2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2)
Luke 9:28-43a

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
March 3, 2019

When the sun is shining it seems like almost anything is possible – am I right? On grey, dark days we hunker down inside, we get isolated and, let’s admit it, depressed. Our burdens get to seeming heavier, our problems thornier, questions more confusing. What is broken starts to look like it might be impossible to mend.

But when the sun comes out, our lives suddenly seem more doable. The radio plays “Good Day Sunshine.” We venture outside where twigs and leaves sparkle. We walk with a lighter step. People make eye contact, smile and chat, perfect strangers celebrating this simple miracle of nature. And maybe we find that, whatever our troubles, with the sun shining we are better able to glimpse a light at the end of the tunnel, more able to discern the next step we could take to move forward, or see where help might be found, or what help we might be able to give.

This winter the sun has been covered up a lot. Here at church our prayer list is full to overflowing with the loss and illness and challenges of people connected with the congregation or in our wider, outreaching circles of nurture and relationship. It’s just that time of year. It’s time to hear again the story of Christ’s transfiguration.

The transfiguration is like a divine shaft of sunlight flashing into the disciples’ experience, illuminating Jesus – showing who he truly is, the Son of God. In biblical language, this light is God’s *glory* – a kind of tangible, radiant energy like fire or even lightning that God gives off directly. When you experience God’s glory, you know it! You sense God’s splendor and might, God’s beyond-ness, and at the same time God’s amazing, all-surpassing love, God’s perfect justice, God’s perfect peace.

We can imagine that for Jesus, the glory he encountered on the mountain was like a surge of positive energy from his divine source. He went up to pray, and God recharged him for the next, most dangerous part of his mission, his journey to the cross.

The disciples had more trouble making sense of this glory-revelation. Luke says they struggled to stay awake – which is strange – until we realize they did the same thing in the garden of Gethsemane. While Jesus was praying, fully awake to God’s reality, the disciples were sleeping, not able to take God’s glory in, not awake to what this otherworldly vision of light could mean for their own mission.

Until they went down the mountain, that is. And that’s when God’s glory connected with the world they knew.

They walked straight into a painful and confusing situation that defied all efforts. A boy was desperately ill with what we call epilepsy, they called demon-possession. Seizures *convulsed*

and *mauled* him, even throwing him to the ground when he tried to walk toward Jesus. The anxious father was helpless to protect his son. And the disciples were also helpless to heal this boy the way they had healed so many the others.

But then we see what happens when God's glory crashes into human pain. We see how Jesus is able to channel all that divine power gained on the mountain to heal this boy who couldn't be healed any other way.

And we see that this is where God's glory is really intended to operate. Glory is not just for mountaintops – God's glory does its real work downhill, in the shadows, where sunlight is rare and desperately needed. God's glory does its best work in the broken places where people fear no healing can ever happen.

Every gospel that describes the transfiguration also follows it with this exact same story of the boy nobody could heal, the demon no one could cast out – until Jesus put God's glory to work. Because this is the whole point of God's glory. To set free those who are bound, release all earth from suffering, and bring healing in the love and peace and justice of God.

God's glory is meant for the broken places. And that is good news for you and me.

Because our lives are not like shining mountaintops. Our lives are a heck of a lot more complicated and confusing and shadowy. And maybe that has worried us in the past. Maybe it's created a disconnect in our faith and caused us doubt. Maybe we've been afraid we can never really know God personally, or follow God correctly, because our lives never seem to shine in that special way. We never seem to be "awake enough" to see God's holiness. Or we soon lose the vision in our struggles, discouragement, and worry, the burdens we carry and the pain we witness all around.

If that sounds like you, today, hear this good news. Only God is absolutely holy and glorious. We are not asked to be. And yet – amazingly -- this God who is glory, the Christ who shines with all glory, lives with us and moves among us, thanks be to God. Christ brings the brilliant glory of love, peace, forgiveness, and justice right to where we live. Brings hope, grants courage, rescues what is lost. Maybe we had the idea that God only truly shines in beautiful places – not in places we would call ugly or hopeless or scary or frustrating or dangerous.

But God's glory is meant for broken places. The question is, *how will we go there with God?*

Long ago a spiritual director told me that the one place where God can be depended on to meet us is the place of deepest pain. If we dare to identify the deepest place of pain, in ourselves, in our world, and pray with that pain, then it is for sure God will meet us there. God will never be absent from that place. Truth is, God's glory is already there, in that place of pain, and when we go there, we meet God.

I wonder what that might mean for us and our mission as God's people? To follow God's glory to the broken places. To pay attention where needs are real. Because that does seem to be exactly where Jesus goes, and where he wants to lead us too.

I wonder what broken places are especially real for you. What locations you would call the broken places. Physical locations... Social locations... Economic locations... I wonder where you are most aware of God's glory and healing being needed, and where you might even be afraid that healing cannot happen. What broken places are calling out to you... I wonder, because this can help us see where and how God is calling our congregation to get to work.

Pastor Tom Wright has written, *"the more open we are to God, and to the different dimensions of God's glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world."* He goes on to say, *"We are right to be wary when we return from some great worship service, when we rise from a time of prayer in which God has seemed close and God's love real and powerful. These things are never given for their own sake, but so that, as we are equipped by them, God can use us in God's needy world."* (Luke for Everyone, Tom Wright, p, 114)

Prayer is what sent Jesus up that mountain to meet God. And we might not think much of our own prayers, we might not believe God's glory could be anywhere near them... but we would be surprised. Because God's glory shines wherever pain is addressed. I think of our church prayer chain, and every person who's been moved by someone's struggle, enough to ask the church to pray for them. That sets in motion something powerful. Two times in the last few days I've heard specific reports of someone we prayed for who has recovered very well. That's not something small. That's God's glory at work.

God's glory is shining shafts of sunlight into the most ordinary places, bringing God's power and healing and relief and forgiveness and help where we may not think to look or notice. And God's glory is shining in places where we would never believe God's glory could shine.

A friend shared her experience serving as pastor in a small town in Pennsylvania. The area was severely depressed, factories closed down, main street boarded up, a drug house thriving right across from the church. People couldn't find work, and many had just given up. The pastor said each time she drove up over the hill and down into that town, when she crossed the city limits, it was as if she could physically feel a spirit of despair and hopelessness descending, like a brooding presence.

But she remembers one particular morning, after she'd been there a few years, when she drove into town on the same road she always did, over that rise and down -- but suddenly everything looked completely different. A shaft of brilliant sunlight suddenly slashed across her view, changing everything. The broken sidewalks, buckled and cracked, suddenly gleamed golden. The shards of broken glass along the curbs glistened and sparkled. The weeds standing tall in abandoned lots, all of a sudden were glowing dazzling bright. She caught her breath! And it came to her all at once --- *God loves this place. God is here. This place is holy to God.*

My friend received it as a holy vision, a transfiguration. It was God's glory shining on that broken town.

And you know, when you see glory shining like that, it can seem like almost anything is possible. That town could not miraculously come back to life overnight. But God's glory was there and is there still, just as surely as God's glory is here.

And God's glory does its best work in broken places. I wonder what that means for us, and for our ministry in Christ's name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.