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AMDG

Last Epiphany A– February 23, 2020

One of my favorite pieces of classical music is Handel’s Messiah. And the part of the Oratorio that is among my favorites is not the familiar Hallelujah Chorus, but rather the Recitative for Bass, “Behold I tell you a mystery” and the accompanying aria, “The trumpet shall sound.”

These two pieces, based on Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, capture for me musically, the spirit of transfiguration. This is the text –

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall be chang’d in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. For this corruptible must put on incorruption; and this mortal must put on immortality.”

I love it. St. Paul is talking about us – you and me. Changed in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of a trumpet. Our fragile and mortal selves, suddenly becoming indestructible and immortal.

We all love stories of transformation. We all want to believe there is more to us than meets the eye. Whether it’s Pip in *Great Expectations*, Rey in *Star Wars*, or Harry Potter - the idea that there is more to us than meets the eye, or that we might have potential to become something more than what we seem to be on the outside is part of our human makeup – and that’s because it’s true. And the Transfiguration is important because it points to that truth.

The Transfiguration is one of a handful of events in the life of Jesus that that is nearly identical in all three synoptic gospels. The details of the Transfiguration are more consistent in Mark, Matthew, and Luke than the details of the Nativity and even the Resurrection – Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, James, and John; Jesus becomes transfigured; Moses and Elijah appear; Peter is so amazed he wants to camp out there forever; they hear God say, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him;” I think it’s pretty amazing that these details would remain consistent over the some 60 years that it took for the Gospels to come together.

So, this event was pretty important to the early Christians. And over the millennia, biblical scholars have debated about the significance of this event – is it a foreshadowing of the Resurrection; do the presence of Moses and Elijah, signify Jesus fulfilling the Law and Prophets; do the tents that Peter wants to build correspond to the hastily built tents that Jews make for the Feast of the Tabernacles, and are they symbols of our transitory life on earth compared to the eternal life given in Christ. These are all fascinating ways to look at the Transfiguration. But what I like to focus on is not all the possible symbolism involved in the Transfiguration of Jesus, but how it connects to our own transfiguration as beloved Sons and Daughters of God.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians on which Handel's Messiah is based, Paul is trying to reassure the believers in Corinth of what awaits them at the second coming, which Paul believed was very soon. But, that eternal life in Christ is not just some promise of our reward after a life well-lived – that eternal life is also now! That twinkling of an eye, that resplendent transfiguration is made known to us in this world, isn't it? There are moments of clarity when we feel a unity with God and with God's creation, when we feel we've had a glimpse of the divine – just like Peter, James, and John on the mountaintop with Jesus. And there may have even been times in our lives when we ourselves have felt transfigured, resplendent, dazzlingly white.

It's whole point of being followers of Christ - transfiguration, transformation, change. When we follow Christ, when we open ourselves to the transformative love of God, everything begins to change. Language changes - words that might have caused us to wince, take on completely different connotations – Lord and King no longer suggest a despotic ruler, but evoke a suffering servant; being last means being first; giving means receiving; dying means living eternally. The things which most people would shy away from, in the Christ life we become drawn to – the poor, the homeless, the suffering, the stranger, the sick and dying.

But these glimpses of our life eternal, those thin spaces in our earthly lives when a bit of heaven breaks through – these don't just come automatically. In the sermon on the mount Jesus explains to us the way of life that offers opportunities for transformative experience – starting

with Blessed are the poor in Spirit, and Blessed are the poor all the way to turning the other cheek and loving our enemies.

Yes, in order to experience the transformative love of God, and to open ourselves to the fullness of who we are meant to be, we have to open ourselves, we have to let go, we have to take risks. In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, “You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

In my year and a half with you here, many of you have shared with me your journeys in the God life, and these stories shine with examples of transformation. Those who’ve shared stories of their involvement with outreach and pastoral care, invariably become tongue-tied or get a distant look in their eyes – that’s transfiguration. Some have shared with me stories of they came to Christ Church or how they came to know Jesus – I hear transfiguration. Even in the painful stories of loss and suffering, I hear people tell me of God’s transformative love. In the powerful experiences of awe and empathy, joy and even heartbreak, we become vulnerable enough for God to enter in and we are transformed. Very often, the stories of transfiguration I hear from others include phrases like, “I never would have expected,” or “I wouldn’t have chosen this,” or “I didn’t want to, but it’s what had to happen...”

Yes, it is through embracing the unwanted and uncomfortable that we open ourselves to God’s transformative love. We cannot transform our own lives, we cannot create our own transfigurations. If we could, it would be our worldly possessions and our routine and mundane pursuits that would transfigure us. We know too well that we do not become resplendent by shopping on Amazon. Cozy, comfortable, and contented do not transform. It’s when we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us that we get glimpses of our true natures as God’s beloved.

And, we may not always be ready when opportunities for transformation come, and that’s fine too, because the Holy Spirit works with us even when we are afraid, unwilling or unaware – offering comfort, encouragement, and clarity. Those are some of the marvels of God’s extravagant love.

We are the body of Christ my beloved sisters and brothers. Jesus’ transfiguration points to our own here in this life and in our future life in the new creation. Let us pray that God may open us more and more to his transformative presence and action within us -

God bless us with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that we may seek truth boldly and love deep within our hearts.

God bless us with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

God bless us with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that we may reach out your hands to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we really CAN make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Old Testament
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.

The Psalm
Psalm 2 Page 586, BCP
Quare fremuerunt gentes?

1

Why are the nations in an uproar? *
Why do the peoples mutter empty threats?

2

Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt,
and the princes plot together, *
against the LORD and against his Anointed?

3

"Let us break their yoke," they say; *
"let us cast off their bonds from us."

4

He whose throne is in heaven is laughing; *
the Lord has them in derision.

5

Then he speaks to them in his wrath, *
and his rage fills them with terror.

6

"I myself have set my king *
upon my holy hill of Zion."

7

Let me announce the decree of the LORD: *
he said to me, "You are my Son;
this day have I begotten you.

8

Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance *
and the ends of the earth for your possession.

9

You shall crush them with an iron rod *
and shatter them like a piece of pottery."

10

And now, you kings, be wise; *
be warned, you rulers of the earth.

11

Submit to the LORD with fear, *
and with trembling bow before him;

12

Lest he be angry and you perish; *
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

13

Happy are they all *

who take refuge in him!

The Epistle
2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The Gospel
Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, 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."

Atmospherics: Being Transfigured

The Feast of the Transfiguration, which we celebrate today, is not primarily a commemoration of an event in the life of Jesus. If it were, it would be a sign of disobedience to the very story we tell on this day. The voice from heaven clearly instructs Peter, James, and John not to set up shrines to commemorate this event. Instead, their call, and ours, is to keep listening to the teaching of Jesus, now revealed in all his glory. What they had witnessed then was no special effects spectacle, but rather a powerful symbolic affirmation of all that was at stake both in Jesus himself and their (and our) continuing obedience to him.

Today isn't about razzle-dazzle and special effects for worship, either. As tempting as it may be to go there, don't. This year's "worship spectacle" will be "so last week" in less than seven days in our current culture. So don't invest in graphics or special lighting. Invest in good reading. Tell

this story well. Telling the story well doesn't mean telling it with too much expression (vocal razzle-dazzle is no more helpful and may be even more distracting than visual!). It means letting the words be the words they are, pronouncing them well, and offering the whole at a steady, understandable pace, and perhaps a time of silence following it. Let the words themselves provide the images and sounds and awe in people's imaginations—these words and your congregation are more than capable of it!

How people may respond to the story of this “visionary experience” is likely to vary. Some may have had visions of this kind themselves and find it both plausible and affirming. Others are likely to think this some sort of bizarre fairy tale. Both can be missing the point if the point is the literality of the events described rather than the meaning this story and the broader biblical story we also hear today supplies for them. Did Peter and the others see this? Our reading from 2 Peter this morning affirms they did. But even they didn't place their stock in what they saw, but rather what it meant: that in the face of Jesus in their midst they were seeing the face of God's Beloved.

We are the body of Christ. His transfiguration points to ours here in this life and, after our resurrection with Christ, in the new creation. All of us who seek to be disciples of Jesus are being transfigured here in this life, through the power of the Holy Spirit, from glory to glory, that we may attain entire holiness, perfection in love in this life. That process continues, as we cooperate with it, even when the more momentary revelations cease or are forgotten.

The momentary revelations happen, too, for many of us. And they are a blessing whenever and however they reach us in our bodies. Sometimes they come through visions where we ourselves see something of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Many testify that they come by tasting that glory in his body and blood offered to us at the Lord's Table. For some, they come more frequently hearing the word sung or spoken and our minds and hearts igniting with the glory of it. For others, by touching or being touched with a mercy and strength we did not know we had or could receive. And perhaps imperceptibly but no less powerfully, they can come through smells that transport our souls in awe and wonder.

No matter how such revelations come, the transfiguration of Jesus, and ours in such moments, is not for himself or for us. It is instead for the sake of God's mission, God's unceasing effort to redeem the whole creation, and in that process to save us and save us to the uttermost.

In Your Planning Team

This is a “segue Sunday” and “feast day” rolled into one. Plan to celebrate. Sing “big hymns” or praise songs to rejoice in the majesty of God with us. Celebrate Holy Communion grandly. Have a party or a potluck after worship, and feast in each other's fellowship. Say and sing lots of Alleluias. Rejoice!

And... and remember the reason for this rejoicing. It's not just because you need to get the feasting and the Alleluias “out of your system” before entering a season of fasting and, for most Christians for many centuries, no Alleluias again until the Easter Vigil or Easter morning. We rejoice this day in the hope and power of the Transfigured One as we embark on a season in which we will actively seek transformation in heart and life with those preparing for baptism at Easter and for ourselves who accompany them, as well. The one who shines in glory is clear about the cost of discipleship to him: everything we have. His glorification assures us in the

intensification of self denial, fasting, penitence, acts of justice and compassion, and acts of devotion and worship we will give ourselves to in the seven weeks ahead.

Today, we rejoice. Wednesday, we begin the fast. Always, we listen to Jesus.

So even as you plan for rejoicing and feasting today, plan sermon and perhaps the final hymn to point toward the fasting about to come.

Celebrate and make the segue toward Lent today with the hope that today's celebration may continue the Spirit's ongoing work of sanctifying, transfiguring your congregation into that glorious body on the mountain that immediately then goes into the valley to cast out demons, heal diseases, declare justice, forgive sins, bless the poor, and teach all who will become his disciples to do the same -- living fully as Christ's baptized body in the world.