

February 27, 2022
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Transfiguration, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36, 37-43a

Hopefully this is our last-ever Sunday of Zoom-only worship. At the beginning of the week, I decided I should take advantage of one of Zoom's advantages by using multimedia in today's sermon. But I had no idea what form that would take. It became clearer as the week went on, though the details changed just this morning.

I presume we all know that Russia invaded Ukraine this week. News and social media feeds are full of it. I presume that we are all more than a little on edge about it. I had started to dare to think about reclaiming more of my pre-pandemic lifestyle. But now ... there's a war in Europe. It hurts even to say that. We are facing yet another "unimaginable" in a recently very long line of "unimaginables."

If you're a fan of the television show Saturday Night Live, you know that each episode begins with a "cold open"—that is, without any opening credits. Instead SNL starts with the week's first comedy sketch, most often a sharply barbed one about current political events and political personalities. I watch Saturday Night Live, but not live, because it's on too late for me. But I like to stream the week's cold open at more reasonable hour. It's worth it just for the possibility of seeing the comedian Kate McKinnon, who has the uncanny ability to realistically portray figures from Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren to Jeff Sessions and Rudy Giuliani.

Last night's SNL cold open was not anything like that. Instead, it was this:¹

[PLAY VIDEO OF SNL COLD OPEN OF FEBRUARY 27, 2022]

In case you missed it at the beginning, that was the Ukrainian Chorus Dumka of New York performing a piece called "Prayer for Ukraine." I learned about performance not because I stayed up late last night, but rather because I got up very early this morning. I wanted to check the news, in case something *really* bad happened overnight. I understand my responsibility as a preacher to include connecting the news, including the news from Ukraine, to the Gospel. I wish I had all that worked out, but I'll tell you right now, I don't.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphanytide, the stretch of time between the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. For the church, epiphanies are earthly manifestations of Jesus' divinity. While we recognize that theme most intentionally on the Feast of the Epiphany, it's sprinkled throughout Epiphanytide.

On this last Sunday before Lent begins, we get what might be the most glorious epiphany of all: the Transfiguration. Each year on this Sunday we get one of the three gospel stories of the Transfiguration. This year, it's Luke's turn to shine along with Jesus. Luke's story is a bit different from the other two, in that Luke serves up not one epiphany but two in quick succession: a miraculous mountaintop theophany and a miraculous lowland healing. Luke is always very good at exchanging the highs and the lows.

Perhaps it is the plight of us lowlanders to pine for a mountaintop theophany. Some lucky few of us even get one or two over the course of a lifetime. But it's not the norm. Even among those original disciples, only Peter and John and James got to see the Transfiguration. Even for Jesus, that wasn't everyday life. Everyday life was more like the convulsing only child of that distressed father. Luke reminds us that the divine presence is there, too.

There is something that Jesus tried to explain something to us, something that there is now is now science to back: generosity is good for us. Generosity—in the form of what we in church often call time, talent, and treasure—enhances physical and mental health and well-being. The science on this is getting more and more clear.² Generosity, which is to say compassion, which is to say love—maybe it's all we ever really have for healing and for seeing God and even for fighting back, against tyrants and liars and all the forces of evil in the world. Jesus was executed by an occupying authoritarian government. His only weapon was love. Love was enough.

I've never had a mountaintop theophany, but I have had moments of transcendence. Some of them were even atop a mountain or at the ocean or in a church. But most of them were elsewhere—unsought, unexpected, unplanned. They arose in moments of vulnerability—which is to say, they arose during exchanges of love—with friend, with family, with stranger, with someone I barely met.

I wish I could promise you a mountaintop theophany; I wish I could give you the recipe for getting one. If I could give it to you, then I'd get it myself. But there isn't a recipe. It doesn't work like that, and it's never going to work like that. By all means, go to the mountain ... but come back down. There is much yet left undone. I'm pretty sure, it's when you come down, that's where you're going to see God.

Jan Richardson is a United Methodist minister who is also a writer and visual artist. She writes this: "The story of the Transfiguration is about opening our eyes to glory, allowing that glory to alter us, and becoming willing to walk where it leads us."³ This is Jan Richardson's painting "Transfiguration II."⁴ She has three paintings that I found online depicting the Transfiguration, but I'll show this one.



With that image showing, I'm going to read a blessing that she wrote, one that is really more like a poem. It's called "Dazzling: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday."

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.

We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.

But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.

It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.

It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray

until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.⁵

I'm going to close with another piece of music. It's a piece called "Requiem for Peace," by Canadian composer Larry Nickel. In this recording it's performed by the National Philharmonic of Ukraine.⁶ It has been widely shared by my clergy colleagues on social media this week, and I thought we should watch it today.

[PLAY VIDEO OF "REQUIEM FOR PEACE" SUNG BY THE NATIONAL PHILHARMONIC OF UKRAINE]

Note: I added two more special pieces to this liturgy, as follows ...

Following A Prayer of Communion

A Prayer for Ukraine

Archbishop Justin Welby
Archbishop Stephen Cottrell

God of peace and justice, we pray for the people of Ukraine today. We pray for peace and the laying down of weapons. We pray for all those who fear for tomorrow, that your Spirit of comfort would draw near to them. We pray for those with power over war or peace, for wisdom, discernment and compassion to guide their decisions. Above all, we pray for all your precious children, at risk and in fear, that you would hold and protect them. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.⁷

For the Blessing

When Glory A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday by Jan Richardson

That when glory comes,
we will open our eyes
to see it.

That when glory shows up,
we will let ourselves
be overcome
not by fear
but by the love
it bears.

That when glory shines,
we will bring it
back with us
all the way,
all the way,
all the way down.⁸

Notes

¹ “Ukrainian Cold Open,” from the February 27, 2022 episode of *Saturday Night Live*, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjE4_h0t7qI (accessed February 27, 2022).

² See, for example, “The Science of Generosity,” The Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, May 2018, available online at https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf (accessed February 27, 2022).

³ Jan Richardson, “Transfiguration Sunday: When Glory,” a post to her blog *The Painted Prayerbook*, February 23, 2014, available online at <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/02/23/transfiguration-sunday-when-glory/> (accessed February 27, 2022).

⁴ Ibid. This image was included with the post. Jan Richardson’s art may be purchased at her website *Jan Richardson Images*, <https://janrichardsonimages.com/> (accessed February 27, 2022).

⁵ Jan Richardson, “Dazzling: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday,” included in “Transfiguration Sunday: Dazzling,” a post to her blog *The Painted Prayerbook*, February 3, 2013, available online at <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/02/03/transfiguration-sunday-dazzling/> (accessed February 27, 2022). It appears in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015).

⁶ The National Philharmonic of Ukraine, “Requiem for Peace,” composed by Larry Nickel, February 20, 2020, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBDi9vqOrIE> (accessed February 27, 2022).

⁷ Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, “A Prayer for Ukraine. This prayer was widely shared on social media, including via a Tweet from the Archbishop of Canterbury on February 23, 2022, available at <https://twitter.com/JustinWelby/status/1496536682237206546> (accessed February 27, 2022).

⁸ Also included with Jan Richardson’s blog post, “When Glory: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday.” It appears in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015).