

Last Sunday after the Epiphany/Transfiguration (Year C)
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT
The Rev. Derek J. Stefanovsky

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

Revealing What Already Exists

Each Sunday, we read four readings in church: two are from the Old Testament, two are from the New Testament. These pairings seem to exist on a continuum between preachers and congregations asking, “How are these related?” to “Wow, these are all talking about the same thing!” Today feels like a bit of the second extreme for me. To set the stage: over the last several weeks, since the Epiphany in early January, we have been hearing many stories of Jesus revealing himself to be both divine and human. We have seen this accomplished in miracles, in declarations given by others, and by what Jesus himself has said. Today brings this period to a close, as we observe the last Sunday after the Epiphany and begin to set our sights on Lent. But let's not get ahead of ourselves!

Today in many denominations, we celebrate what is known as the Transfiguration. If these last several weeks have been all about Jesus revealing himself as both divine and human, then it seems quite fitting that today we would read this vivid account of Jesus' divinity being revealed yet again to those around him. Let us turn to the texts: in our reading from Exodus, we hear the story of Moses being given the Law on Mount Sinai, and, that on account of his close

encounter with God, and his status as a Law giver and prophet, the skin of his face was shining. Admittedly, Paul's commentary on Moses and Judaism in the 2nd Letter to the Corinthians is a bit problematic, isn't it? This is one of these passages that we must wrestle with on account of it seemingly setting aside the Old Testament as less than the New Testament, something that the church must be quick to call out as a grave error. I'm not going to explicitly criticize Paul for being anti-Semitic—the irony of a 21st century white American calling out a 1st century man of color for all the things he did wrong is not lost on me—but I will say that this passage presents some challenges, and used improperly can be dangerous.

Moving on to the passage we hear from Luke, we can see clearly the parallels and dialogue between our reading from the Old Testament and New Testament. Like Moses, the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Like Moses, this seems to happen because of his encounter with God in prayer, except that for Jesus, that encounter is at least partially with himself as God in the flesh. Luke's Gospel tells us that all this was done in advance of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem to accomplish what we will soon set out sights on in the events of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. The Transfiguration is accomplished not only in Jesus' appearance changing, but also in the placement of Moses and Elijah in this story. You see, Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament, prophets along with others like Miriam,

Deborah and Hannah. Many even thought that Moses and Elijah would return before the end times. Luke's Gospel places Jesus in this same line of Law givers and Prophets, with the additional twist of also being the Messiah. As if that isn't enough, we read that a voice thundered from heaven in a cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" This again sets up a great parallel: on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we remembered Jesus' baptism, and the same sort of voice thundered a similar message: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." If that baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, then the Transfiguration might be the very pinnacle of that ministry.

Something I've been thinking about is that, while the Transfiguration seems to have surprised the disciples, the reality was right in front of them all along. The Transfiguration revealed something that was always there, Jesus' humanity and divinity. How many other things exist in our world, but we never see them for what they are? Either we don't see them, period, or we see them for what we want them to be. Maybe some examples would help explain this. When some big revelation explodes in our culture, say the ongoing, almost daily revelation that we have yet to seriously come to grips with the reality of racism in our country, many people are shocked, disgusted, and outraged. And rightfully so! Yet, its not like the revelations change the reality of the situation. The racism has been there all along, we either never saw it or were able to ignore it. Or the growing fevered pitch

around climate change and environmental degradation: this has been going on for over a century! The fact that we now better understand it and realize the urgent need to make systemic change doesn't change the underlying reality that has existed for all these decades. Part of my work as a deacon is to seek out peoples and societal structures that the church ignores, either on accident or on purpose, and to relate those findings to the church. Because the church often forgets, we often forget.

Since the last time we gathered, our siblings in the United Methodist Church faced a tough week. Gathered in convention, and in a close vote, they moved to clamp down on LGBTQ+ folks in the life of the church: no church leadership and definitely no marriage for these folks. I realize that many folks in this congregation may be upset or confused by that decision. I know that I am. But, just like the revelation seen in the Transfiguration didn't change the underlying reality of who Jesus was, the outcome of the Methodist's vote didn't change the underlying reality that LGBTQ+ folks are frequently not welcome in the life of the church. It has been the case all along, we just haven't always had to face it. And we must resist the temptation to think that the Episcopal Church has risen above this—I have yet to see much evidence in my life and work in the Episcopal Church that LGBTQ+ folks are held to the same standard as straight folk. They are still marginalized and held to a higher standard, we just do so in more clever ways than

we used to. We must pray for our United Methodist friends to see a way forward, and especially for our marginalized friends in that denomination and elsewhere in a time where there is great pain boiling to the surface.

So this is the point that I'd invite us to consider today. Just as the Transfiguration revealed something that already existed, what are some things that we're doing here at St. Thomas's that have brought out an underlying reality? I've provided some rather depressing examples, and I'm sure you can think of many more. But what are some positive ways that you've seen a reality revealed that was already there, but perhaps hidden? I think of the work we do in our religious education program here at St. Thomas's, where we reveal our student's innate curiosity and joy for God. I think of the work in Malawi that this parish has joined in on, where we reveal the underlying reality that there are already the resources in the world to ensure that nobody goes hungry or without medical care, and where we help reveal the underlying reality of the dignity of every human being. I think of the beautiful music we hear every week in this space, revealing the already existent reality that we have a great variety of gifts in this congregation that can be used to lift our hearts and minds to God. None of these things just happen—they are revealed through a series of events, and would otherwise be hidden—we might think that our children are not interested in God, or that there is simply no way to feed and care for some of the most impoverished people in the world, or that we

didn't have the resources to glorify God in our parish. And so I would invite you to consider the ways in which God might be revealing something that already exists in your own life but is not yet clear to you. This could range anywhere from an unfortunate reality in our society or a revelation that you possess the God-given gifts to accomplish something marvelous to make the world a better place.

This brings me back to Lent, which I mentioned a few minutes ago. As you may know, Ash Wednesday is this week, which marks the beginning of Lent. If Lent is about reexamining our relationship with God, seeing what needs pruning, seeing what needs nurturing, perhaps Lent, too, is really about revealing things that already exist. We try to face the things in our lives that cause separation from God, and to nurture the things that bring us closer to God. And so I would invite you, as we enter the season of Lent this week, to remain at this scene of the Transfiguration. Where might the Holy Spirit be working with you to reveal underlying realities in your life and in the world around you, so that you might see them more clearly?