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Feast of the Transfiguration (transferred)
August 4, 2019

Propers for the Transfiguration:
Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99:5-9
2 Peter 1:13-21
Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration and baptism

Some of you may have had an experience something like this. You know someone, know them pretty well, you think. Sometimes this is a parent: you grow up with them for some extended period of time, with a pretty definite impression of who they are and what they're about. And then they die, and at their funeral you meet their friends or colleagues that perhaps you don't know as well. Old army buddies, or friends from their own childhood. And they bowl you over with the most surprising stories about your recently deceased loved one. You had known your father as always strict and serious; they tell you about how, once the kids were asleep, he was the life of the party. Your mother was always shy and timid, and they tell you how one time, as teenagers, they had snuck out of the house without their parents knowing and drove to Atlantic City, and the ridiculous hijinks that ensued. An older and unassuming fellow parishioner: he had never told anyone his role in the Second World War; he was highly decorated and well-regarded, with the medals, and the scars, to prove it. And so forth.

If this has happened to you, as it has to me, you may remember the shock of having learned something new that totally changed your understanding of that individual. You had thought he was one thing; you had thought she was one kind of person. It turns out there was far more than you had known. The person didn't change, of course, but your understanding was upended. There were depths there that you hadn't known.

I mention this as a metaphor, however inadequate, for the story of the Transfiguration that we heard from the Gospel of Luke today, as we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up to a mountain so he could pray. While he was praying, his face was completely changed. His clothes became dazzling white. They saw God's glory in Christ. What's more, the disciples saw Moses and Elijah standing next to him, talking with him about his "departure," his death, a subject about which Moses, at least, would have known a great deal, having died himself.

Peter wants to build tents so they could stay there, basking in God's glory. But a cloud came over them, darkening the sky (like it darkened the sky above Moses on Mount Sinai), and the disciples were terrified. From the cloud came a voice, the voice of God, saying, "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him." And then it's over. The glory is absent; Moses and Elijah are gone. The four men travel back down the mountain.

This is a very strange story. There is nothing else like it in the New Testament. It would be tempting to disregard it as something anomalous and mythological that snuck into Luke, except that it's recounted in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as the second Epistle of Peter (which we heard this morning), so it was clearly something that made an impact on the early

Christian community. It was clearly an event that revealed something important about Jesus that future believers should know—that we should know.

The attentive reader may find resonances between this story and one that appears earlier in the gospels. It is one of the only other times that three gospels agree on God the Father speaking out of heaven. That event was Jesus' baptism. When Jesus is baptized by John, a voice from heaven speaks, "You [or he] is my beloved Son, with whom [him] I am well pleased."

There is a parallel there. In both cases, God is revealing to those who will hear the identity of Jesus: that he is their Lord; that he is the anointed one; that they should follow him. In both cases, those around learn that there are depths to the Jesus, whom they had known already, that they did not know before. Jesus didn't change. Jesus' identity didn't change. But the disciples' understanding changed.

In just a moment, we will celebrate the rite of baptism. I don't know if we will hear a voice from heaven or not. (Maybe we will!) But I do know that Wyatt is going to be transfigured. With the water coming off his cute little face, and the oil smeared on his cute little forehead, something profoundly important is happening. That is because, in his baptism, Wyatt becomes part of Jesus, the Jesus who is God's glory, the Jesus who is God himself.

As a result, from then on, for the rest of his life, Wyatt is part of the life of God. The water will dry, and the oil will come off, but to God it will still be visible. There will be a depth to Wyatt that may not be immediately obvious to a casual acquaintance—or, perhaps, even to him. That will be because a cross has been made on his forehead, and it is the cross that God the Father will see when he meets Wyatt in the age to come. When he sees Wyatt, he will see his Son.

I wish I could say that that cross will protect Wyatt from all suffering, that it will prevent bad things from ever happening to him. But it won't; Jesus' own baptism didn't have that result, either. But it will mean that no matter what happens, no matter where he goes or what he does, no matter what happens to him, in sickness and in health, as long as he shall live, he will be part of the life of God through Jesus Christ. And when he gets a little bit older, and solid food is less of a challenge than it might be right now, this new member of Christ's body will participate in the celebration of God's saving act in Christ and partake of the Eucharist: Christ's body in his body; his body in Christ's.

As we move to the baptismal font now, the place of our adoption, may we reflect on our own baptisms, our own transfigurations. Those marks on our foreheads are indelible and, in the fullness of time, they will shine with the radiance of the light of the world.

One more thing. If any of you here have not been baptized, and would like to, feel free to join us at the font. I practice open baptism and I would be happy to welcome you into the household of God as well.

The glory of the Lord fills the earth. O come, let us adore him.