



Theophanes the Greek, "The Transfiguration of Jesus," 14th Century, Public Domain



**ST. COLUMBA'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Transfigurations

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*Epiphany last, Year B
Mark 9: 2-9*

I might be jumping the gun a bit but I want to be the first to say that spring is around the corner. Officially in 34 days. Punxsutawney Phil really blew it this year. We are not on the edge of more winter. We are on the edge of a coming spring. If I squint I can see it. Like literally.

I'm paying close attention to the buds on the trees these days. Yes, technically, they're still dormant. But recently I've caught myself staring at them, caught myself expecting to see the first sprouts of new life. Keep watch -- do not fall asleep! Soon the world will shift, will transform. Our greys -- I am fervently praying -- will turn to warm pastel.

Change is a part of the world. With just a bit more heat and few altering molecules, biological life can radically alter. Eighty-eight percent of insects go through complete metamorphosis. And a large portion of the human body is remade every seven to ten years.

The world is dynamic and not just biologically. Today is Valentine's day -- a

tribute and celebration of the transformative power of giddy, infectious, gobsmacking affection and love. Our journey with each other and with ourselves -- with God -- points to a landscape always being remade and rediscovered.



In today's Gospel the landscape is radically transformed. Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples up the mountain to be alone. In Luke the disciples were in a sleepy fog when Jesus suddenly transfigured before them -- his clothes becoming a dazzling white -- and they were, one translation has it, "sore afraid."

Born in the 14th century in what is now modern day Turkey, Theophanes the Greek wrote an icon to depict the transfiguration this way (attacked at the end of the sermon).

The sky is full of gold -- a precious metal that does not tarnish and often represents the presence of God in

iconography -- but the earth is not alien. It is green and ordinary and full of jagged cliffs and rocks.

Jesus is centered and surrounded by carefully crafted geometric shapes. A man-dorla -- the large circle that encapsulates Jesus -- represents a luminous cloud: the open eye of the eternal realm. And two triangular like chevrons -- or arrowhead shapes -- one inverted, all layered behind Jesus. Perhaps representations of the Triune God.

Jesus is flanked by Moses (holding the Torah) and Elijah -- two men who also found God atop mountains. They are elevated with Jesus to show that Jesus has come not to reject the law and the prophets but to embrace and fulfill what we now call Jewish sacred text.

Down below the disciples are scattered in fear and chaos. Peter on the far left, being terrified and not knowing what to say, points to the hillside as a place to build shrines commemorating God's in-breaking.

Jesus appears to reject this well intentioned suggestion as a form of idol worship -- nothing more than fissures or tombs in the ground. Something that one might fall into -- something that might trap one into death.

In contrast to the chaos and fear, Jesus brings peace and order. This peace and order is not sentimental or passive. The light of Jesus so fills his body it escapes shooting out in all directions. The heavenly blues and white reach all the way down to the grief stricken disciples and reflect off their clothes.

In a moment, in a single frame heaven and earth are brought together. They speak in one voice. Some of the disciples look away; Moses and Elijah have the clear sighted power to look directly at

Jesus. And to whom does Jesus look? To us.



The transfiguration happens almost dead center in the book of Mark. It harkens back Jesus' baptism in the first chapter and, by placing Jesus in dazzling white, it also points forward to the very last chapters of his coming death and resurrection. In fact just before Jesus takes the disciples up the mountain he explains for the first time what true discipleship will mean for them. "If any want to become my followers," he tells them, "let them deny themselves and and take up their cross and follow me."

To "take up one's cross" has come to mean all manner of things. Often we think of personal, private hardships that we must endure. But here Jesus is not speaking figuratively but literally. He goes on to tell his disciples that the Son of Man -- literally the Human One -- "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and be killed." Peter and so many others had hoped that Jesus would become Israel's Messiah. A conquering figure that would liberate the Jews from the colonial empire of Rome. Peter hoped for a Messiah that would break domination with domination -- a kind of redemptive violence.

So when Peter heard Jesus speak of his suffering and death, he pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him.

God bless Peter. The patron saint of stepping in it.

Jesus sees through Peter's false hopes and speaks plainly to him. Holy violence is not from God but from the powers of satan.

The power of Jesus is not a power of domination but grace. Not of revenge but forgiveness.

Faith has this paradoxical quality. Jesus tells his disciples that if they want to save their life they must be willing to lose it.

Taking up the cross meant a willingness to face public humiliation and execution for resisting the evil and violent powers of the establishment.

It is this teaching that immediately precedes the vision of Jesus transfigured. In order to see Jesus in dazzling white the disciples first must understand that he would be beaten black and blue. In order to see Jesus as ONE with heaven and earth -- in order to see that the eye of heaven breaks through the soul and body of Jesus -- they must understand that his calling will mean their full resistance and willingness to die as witnesses to the true love of God. On the mountain the disciples hear a message from God. It is simple and to the point. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."

As if to say, I know this message is hard to hear, but I dwell in this one's body; if you want to know me, you must know the one before you.



In the early 2000s in Southern California the Wagners -- Lynn and her husband Dan and their two girls, Mandie and Carrie -- were leaving church and headed to the boardwalk nearby their home when their car was struck by a driver, Lisa Cotter, who was high on cocaine and meth and driving her two children home from their babysitter. Dan and Lynn woke up in the hospital days later. After sustaining serious head trauma it took them some time to

understand that both their daughters had died instantly in the car crash.

What followed was years of physical and spiritual healing. Dan at first blamed God. Why couldn't they have been a moment later? Why couldn't he have died instead of his girls? Lynn woke up every day filled with anger and hatred towards the other driver, Lisa.

After a long period they believed God wanted them to write to Lisa in prison. Lisa had pleaded guilty and found herself doubly imprisoned. Imprisoned by the state but also by an overwhelming sense of self-hatred, guilt, and shame. She joined a recovery group that eventually gave her the assignment of waking up every morning, looking herself in the mirror and saying, "I love you, Lisa." It was months before she could even look herself in the eye and years before she felt like she could mean it. She began corresponding with Dan and Lynn.

Before Lisa was released Lynn and Dan asked both the parole board and Lisa if they could meet in person. Everyone was initially hesitant. Dan and Lynn did not want to run into her for the first time by accident in a shopping mall. Eventually all the parties agreed.

Dan described that moment this way:

When we walked into the meeting room and laid our eyes on Lisa for the first time, we both hugged her. I don't know why, but it suddenly seemed as if we had all been through this war together. When I hugged her, I started crying and couldn't stop and couldn't let go. In that hug and in my heart I felt a sense of relief. After seven years, I was finally meeting the woman who had killed my daughters. But I

felt no anger, no hatred--just relief.
So I cried.

[Lisa spoke of “living amends” --
taking active steps to share her
experience and try to prevent
others from making the same
mistakes.]

We walked into that building in
fear, thinking we were finally going
to have an end. But it turned out to
be a new beginning. ... It’s about
tragedy, yes, but it’s also about
forgiveness.

I don’t know the whole story about how
Dan, Lynn, and Lisa were able to find
peace. And every story of grief and loss is
importantly different and unique. I am
sure, though, that there are still moments
of shame and anger and pangs of great loss.
One could imagine that at the first thought
of contacting Lisa, Dan and Lynn might
have reacted, *God, ask me anything but
that.*

It was through their mutual journeys of
pain and loss, through their willingness to
open themselves up to vulnerability when
no one would have thought less of them if
they hadn’t; it was through this
cross-shaped life -- a willingness by all three
to give up a part of themselves -- that they
were able to transform their grief into
hope.



This is the good news. That in moments
of confusion and chaos Jesus is there
willing to speak peace. That God, the
creator and redeemer of all that is, may
break into our lives when we least expect it.

These journeys sometimes take years --
sometimes they never fall neatly into place
-- but the love of God is there working to
pull us in. To pull us in and fill us up. Filled
with a light so abundant it may spill out of
our bodies and transform our world.
Amen.