

Exodus 24:15-18

Luke 9:28-45

February 27, 2022

Transfiguration of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SHINE, JESUS, SHINE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

How do you express the inexpressible?

How do you comprehend the incomprehensible?

How do you describe the indescribable?

How do you relate to the unrelatable?

We speak of “mountain-top” experiences. No matter how significant and overwhelming they might be to us, can we honestly say any mountain-top experience we have ever had can compare to the one shared by Peter, James, and John, along with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah?

Just as the three disciples were overshadowed by the cloud on the mountain of Transfiguration, so we find ourselves shrouded in mystery as we hear about the appearance of Jesus’s face being changed and his clothes becoming dazzling white as lightning. Add in the appearance of the long dead Moses and Elijah and the heavenly voice, and it’s no wonder Peter, James, and John were terrified as they entered the cloud. Maybe that’s why “they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.” (Luke 9:36)

And so, I’ll ask again:

How do you express the inexpressible?

How do you comprehend the incomprehensible?

How do you describe the indescribable?

How do you relate to the unrelatable?

We know the arts can express our deepest feelings and profoundest hopes and dreams. This morning, I invite us to turn to the arts to catch a glimpse of meaning of the mysterious Transfiguration of Jesus, there on the mountain. Here are some vignettes from painting, music, prose, and poetry that can help us think about what Jesus in all of his transfigured glory can mean for our lives today.

PAINTING

On April 6, 1520, Raffaello Sanzi da Urbino lay dying in Rome. He was only thirty-seven years old, but was and is considered to be one of the finest painters ever. We know him better simply as Raphael. As he lay dying, he asked his associates to bring his final painting – not yet complete – into the room, so he could look at it as he died. Upon his death, the painting was prominently displayed at his head as he laid in state at his home.

Raphael's final painting (which was completed by his students and apprentices) was "The Transfiguration," which had been commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de Medici (later Pope Clement VII) for the cathedral of Narbonne. Bill is going to put a picture of Raphael's painting on the screen.



After hearing Luke's story of the Transfiguration, you might wonder why there are so many people in the painting. Luke plainly tells us, "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. . . Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him." (Luke 9:28, 30) You see those six men in the top half of the painting – Jesus with his hands outstretched and looking to heaven; Moses with the tablets of the commandments; Elijah with the books of the prophets; James and John hiding their faces; Peter looking up at Jesus. The two additional figures to the left are Christian martyrs, Justus and Pastor, to whom the cathedral at Narbonne was dedicated.

But who are all the people at the bottom of the painting? What a chaotic scene! Raphael combined two stories in one painting, just as this morning's gospel lesson did. At the bottom left, the other nine disciples are shrouded in darkness. They look as if they are at their wits' end. At the bottom right, you see the "large crowd" that met Jesus when he came down from the mountain. There is the young boy, obviously in distress, as the demon suddenly comes upon him. It's hard for you to see the detail, but the boy's right eye is looking toward the heavens as his arm points up, and his left eye looks to the ground as his other arm points down. His desperate father is appealing to the disciples to cure his little boy. The boy's mother has a fearful and desperate expression on her face. Notice the dark gap between the disciples on the left and the family and crowd on the right. Someone has commented that only Jesus can fill that gap. No wonder, then, that the disciple in the red robe is pointing to Jesus on the mountain.¹

Raphael's majestic painting captures a moment in time, when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in his glory, even as the realities of everyday life were being played out at the foot of the mountain. But we know that Peter, James, and John didn't stay up on that mountain, because Jesus didn't stay up on the mountain, shrouded in mystery and glory. Jesus came down and filled that gap. When we are surrounded by the chaos of life – indeed, in all of life – we can point to Jesus who is the one who can help us and everyone else. We can point to Jesus who stands in the gap still today.

MUSIC

We began worship on this Transfiguration Sunday singing "Lord, the Light of Your Love Is Shining . . . Shine, Jesus, Shine." This hymn was written by Graham Kendrick, a prolific British Christian songwriter. The song brought hope and comfort to the mourners who attended the October 9, 1996 memorial service for the teacher and fifteen students who were killed by a gunman at Dunblane Primary School in Scotland on March 13 of that year. It was also sung at the memorial service for the thirty-five people who were killed in the Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australia massacre, also in 1996.²

"Shine, Jesus, Shine" has been called a song of hope, as it proclaims how the light of Jesus's glory shines in the darkness of our lives. As I read the lyrics again, think about those two gospel stories – Jesus, God's only son, the Beloved in all of his glory on the mountain and the man with his sick son at the foot of the mountain. Listen for how we can reflect Jesus's glory here on earth.

*Lord, the light of your love is shining
In the midst of the darkness, shining
Jesus, Light of the world shine upon us
Set us free by the truth you now bring us
Shine on me, Shine on me.*

*Shine, Jesus, shine
Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, Set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow, Flood the nations with grace and mercy
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

*Lord, I come to your awesome presence
From the shadows into your radiance
By the blood I may enter your brightness
Search me, try me, Consume all my darkness
Shine on me, shine on me.*

*Shine, Jesus, shine
Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, Set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow, Flood the nations with grace and mercy
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

*As we gaze on your kingly brightness,
so our faces display your likeness;
ever changing from glory to glory,
mirrored here may our lives tell your story.
Shine on me; shine on me.*

*Shine, Jesus, shine
Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, Set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow, Flood the nations with grace and mercy
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has written another hymn, "O Lord, As You Were on Your Way," about Jesus's mysterious Transfiguration on the mountain. It's worth remembering that the revelation of Jesus's glory takes place in the midst of him telling his disciples about going to Jerusalem to die. Shortly after we read about Jesus in his glory on the mountain, we read in Chapter 9, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51) He would be taken up and nailed to a cross in Jerusalem before he would ever be taken up in glory again. Here's the hymn. How does it speak to you as one of Jesus' disciples?

O Lord, as you were on your way to where you'd one day die,

*You wanted time to rest and pray, to hear God's word to you that day.
You climbed a mountain high with three good friends close by.*

*So soon, the three became aware of such a wondrous sight.
Your face shone bright beyond compare,
just like a glimpse of heaven there!
Your clothes were dazzling white; your glory came to light.*

*The Law, the Prophets guided you as you discerned God's will.
With Moses and Elijah, too, you spoke of God's great plan for you,
God's promise to fulfill one Friday on a hill.*

*Why could you not remain with them and there in glory stay?
God said, "This is my own dear Son! Now listen to him, everyone!"
And so you turned to say you'd go the harder way.*

*O Lord, how often we pursue success at any cost,
And yet we hear God's word anew, that we are called to follow you,
Who served the poor and lost and journeyed to the cross.³*

PROSE

We may have trouble expressing, comprehending, describing, and relating to Jesus's miraculous and mysterious Transfiguration, but every one of us, in one way or another, can totally comprehend and relate to that father's fear and desperation and hope against hope there at the foot of the mountain. In her sermon, "The View from the Valley," Rev. Debie Thomas powerfully relates the glory of God's only Son and the beloved son of the man pleading for help.

"On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response — 'Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!' A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. 'This is my Son, my Chosen.' The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master — the Shining One — and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.'"

"In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes — wide-open, feral — see nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their

hands in shame. ‘Frauds!’ someone yells into the night. ‘Charlatans!’ ‘Where’s your Master?’ the scribes ask the disciples an umpteenth time. ‘Why has he left you?’ ‘We don’t know,’ the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again — an echo straight from hell. He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face. A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night. ‘This is my son!’ a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. ‘Please,’ he sobs to the stars. Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”⁴

AND, FINALLY, POETRY

On this Sunday before Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, we look ahead to the weeks to come when we remember and think about the great cost of God’s love in Jesus’s life and death. Again, this year, we start our Lenten journey in the midst of pandemic uncertainties, economic worries, and the reality of war. All of these concerns, plus the other worries of our lives, sap our energy, demand our attention, and threaten to undermine our faith and trust in God. This mysterious story of the Transfiguration ends with the heavenly voice telling us, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Here is a poem for this Transfiguration Sunday. How will we listen to God’s Chosen Son? And what difference will it make in your life and mine?

We want to know you, Jesus.

We want to cherish and hold

Adore and revere

Esteem and glorify you.

Keep you in our hearts

Glimpse you in our lives

Trace you on our paths,

Comforting the homeless

Grieving with the mourners

Forgiving our sins

Healing our wounds

Raising our dying

We are afraid, awed, overwhelmed at your glory.

We are touched, moved, transformed by your love.

We are cleansed, renewed, refreshed by your forgiveness.

We thank you

We praise you

We love you.

You . . . the transfigured One.

You . . . the resurrected One.

You . . . the One . . .

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”⁵

Let us pray: O God, we open our eyes and we see Jesus, the light of the world, your light. May your light shine upon us. We open our eyes and we see Jesus, not casting us off, but leading us down, leading us out - to ministry, to people. Your love endures forever. We open our ears and we hear your voice, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” And we give you thanks. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information about Raphael and his painting was gathered from several sources, including “Transfiguration by Raphael,” November 1, 2018 at www.tripimprover.com.

²Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine,’” at www.umcdiscipleship.org.

³Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, A Hymn for Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, “O Lord, As You Were On Your Way.”

⁴Debie Thomas, “The View from the Valley,” *Journey with Jesus*, January 31, 2016 at www.journeywithjesus.net.

⁵Author unknown. Taken from Fergus Tyson, *Pastor’s Postings*, February 25, 2012, “A Quote and a Prayer from Transfiguration Sunday,” at www.pastorfergus.wordpress.com