

Last Sunday After the Epiphany
Luke 9:28-43a

Glory and Gladness*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It's the culmination of an eight-week period during which Jesus' divinity has been manifested, or revealed, to us – often in terms of light.

On January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany itself, we heard about the Star of Bethlehem that led the three wise men to the baby Jesus. The following week, we heard about Jesus' baptism and how the heavens were opened up and the Holy Spirit descended upon him.

In recent weeks, we've heard about many "firsts" relating to Jesus: his first miracle at the Wedding at Cana; his first teaching at his hometown synagogue; and the calling of his first disciples. All of these events share the common theme of Jesus being manifested to us as the Son of God.

It's no surprise, then, that the gospel passage for today, the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, is the Transfiguration. In some ways, the Transfiguration is the ultimate revelation of Jesus, who appears on Mount Tabor along with Moses and Elijah – and is transformed into a vision of "dazzling white." It makes sense that this event is the culmination of the season of Epiphany, both in terms of manifestation and light.

One of the most famous – and beautiful – images of the Transfiguration is the painting by the great Renaissance artist Raphael. The Transfiguration was his last work, and he loved it so much that he asked to see it on his death bed – as he lay dying at the young age of 37. There is an enormous mosaic reproduction of this painting in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, just to the left of the high altar, at the Altar of the Transfiguration. It took a team of six artists *nine years* to make this reproduction back in the 18th century, and it is absolutely breathtaking.

Fortunately, you don't have to go to Rome to see Raphael's masterpiece in a church setting. You can just walk behind the organ and look at the window above the altar in our very own St. Joseph of Arimathea chapel. You can also look at the cover of today's bulletin. There, you will see a photo of this beautiful painted glass window. Thank you, Father John David, for this lovely photo! One interesting piece of trivia: The window was originally installed right above our high altar. At one point in the nineteenth century, however, it was actually put into storage until it was later reinstalled at its present location.

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One of the more interesting – and mysterious – features of the Raphael painting is the bottom half of the image. We know that the top half is clearly that of the Transfiguration. We see Peter, James, and John reacting to the transfigured Jesus, who appears in glory with Moses and Elijah in dazzling white. No big surprises there.

But what is going on in the bottom half of the painting? In particular, what is going on in the lower right hand corner with the boy who is pointing upwards? You see him there, right? Why does a painting called the “Transfiguration” feature an individual who, at first glance, doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the Transfiguration?

The short answer is that Raphael’s painting doesn’t just depict the Transfiguration. It also depicts the story that immediately *follows* Transfiguration – which we heard at the end of today’s gospel passage. In that story, we hear about a boy who is possessed by an unclean spirit and who suffers from terrible seizures. (In Matthew’s gospel, the boy is actually described as an epileptic.) That boy is the figure who appears, along with his father, in the lower right hand of Raphael’s painting. The disciples are unable to cure him, but Jesus is able to do so after he descends the mountain.

To be honest with you, I often gloss over the gospel passage about the possessed boy. And, to be *really* honest with you, I often ignore the bottom half of the Raphael painting. To me, the story of the possessed boy often seems like an afterthought – an addendum tacked on to the Transfiguration story. In fact, the story is actually designated as *optional* in the Revised Common Lectionary. (If you look in your bulletin insert, you can see the brackets around the text.)

But the inclusion of the possessed boy in the painting is not just an afterthought. Far from it. In fact, the juxtaposition by Raphael of these two stories – that is, the Transfiguration on the top, and the possessed boy on the bottom – is critical to our understanding of how the Transfiguration applies to us today.

If you’ve ever experienced a loved one going through a seizure, it can be a frightening experience. Some of you may know that our beloved dog, Chartres, has suffered from seizures over the past year. The first time that it happened to her, Michael and I were completely freaked out. We thought for sure that she was going to die. The convulsions and foaming at the mouth were terrifying. And although the event lasted for only a few minutes, it felt like an eternity. We were completely helpless through it all. Although Chartres’ seizures are now under control – thanks to the miracle of modern medicine (and pet insurance) – we still worry from time to time that another seizure might occur.

Perhaps you’ve never encountered anyone going through a seizure. But perhaps you have a friend or a loved one with another chronic illness or debilitating condition that is equally unpredictable and frightening in terms of its manifestation. Or perhaps you have such an illness or condition yourself. In this way, you might be able to relate to the fear and desperation of the possessed boy and his father in the story.

Physical conditions aside, however, I believe that the possessed boy in Raphael's painting is also a symbol for the human condition. That is, the boy's condition is a metaphor for *spiritual* illness. Like that boy, all of us need to be healed of various "demonic" afflictions over which we are powerless. That is, no matter how hard we try, we constantly fall short in terms of loving God and loving our neighbor.

The truth is that there is nothing that *we* can do about our fallen spiritual condition. We are utterly unable to heal ourselves of these afflictions. But we *can* be healed by the grace of Christ, as revealed by the Transfiguration. And that's where the two parts of the painting come in. The significance of the glorious Transfiguration, up above, lies in its relationship with the fallen world, down below, that is desperately in need of transformation and redemption.

The founder and first rector of our parish, the first Father Houghton, preached about the Transfiguration in his Foundation Day sermon in October of 1893. (Thank you, Father Platt for helping me find this reference!) In that sermon, Father Houghton explained why he decided to name this church after the Transfiguration. We were, after all, the very first parish in the Anglican Communion to have this name.

Father Houghton said: "The Transfiguration testified beforehand [to] the Sufferings of Christ in this world, and the Glory that should follow in another. . . . Glory and Gladness unending in another world, shall follow suffering and sorrow transitory in this world if borne in the Name and for the sake of the Lord." In other words, we are promised that, like Jesus, our suffering and sorrow in this world is temporary. One day, the suffering and sorrow experienced at the bottom of the painting will be overcome by the glory and gladness at the top.

The Eastern Orthodox have a similar view about the significance of the Transfiguration. They have noted that the disciples' journey to the cross and Golgotha occurred shortly after the Transfiguration. As a result, the main purpose of the Transfiguration was to strengthen and sustain them on their difficult upcoming journey. The disciples' experience of the Transfiguration – and their foretaste of the divinity of Christ – would sustain them during the terror of the passion and the crucifixion of their beloved teacher.

Which takes us to where we are today. On this Last Sunday After the Epiphany, we are just around the corner from our own Lenten journeys. In three days, it will be Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Lent is, of course, the start of the Church's forty-day journey to the cross and Golgotha.

Lent is not an easy journey, especially if we commit to some kind of spiritual discipline such as fasting or letting something go. But the memory of the Transfiguration – and the promise that one day our sufferings and sorrow will be transformed into glory and gladness – can help to sustain us during the hard times.

As we look towards Ash Wednesday and Lent, I invite you to remember that, as members of the Body of Christ, we are never resigned to living in the bottom half of Raphael's painting. The possessed boy may be a symbol for a fallen humanity. But the promise of the Gospel is that

we will one day experience the glory and gladness of the Transfiguration at the top half of the painting. And that is where the boy is pointing to.

As Father Houghton explained to his parishioners over a century ago, the Transfiguration is a promise that the sufferings and sorrows of this world are transitory. One day, they will lead us to glory and gladness. May we remember these wise words – as well as *both* halves of Raphael’s beautiful painting – as we begin our Lenten journey in just three days.