

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany
Mark 9:2-9

The Grace of Transfiguration*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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A few years ago, researchers from Japan made a fascinating discovery. They discovered that human beings actually glow in the dark. That is, like fireflies, glow worms, and jellyfish, our bodies literally give off light.

Now I'm not talking about the heat that is released from our bodies and that can be detected through infrared scanners. I'm literally talking about light that shines forth from our bodies. The reason why we can't see this light, however, is because our vision would need to be a thousand times stronger in order to detect this light. The light is there. It's just that our eyes are not sensitive enough to see it.

The fact that our bodies literally give off light is a powerful reminder that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The divine light of Christ – light from light, true God from true God – literally shines through us. It's as if God has embedded a clue about our true origins into our DNA. As followers of the Jesus movement, we hope that one day we will be reunited with this heavenly light in its full glory.

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. Epiphany is the season of light, and we've seen a lot of light during the past five weeks. On the Feast of the Epiphany, we encountered the Star of Bethlehem, shining brightly over the manger of Christ. On the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we heard about the heavens opening up at the Baptism of Our Lord. And last week, we celebrated Candlemas and the blessing of the candles.

It's fitting, therefore, that the season of Epiphany culminates with a reading about the dazzling light of the Transfiguration. As we heard in today's gospel, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. There, Jesus' clothes become white – “such as no one on earth could bleach them.” Elijah and Moses also appear, and they talk with Jesus.

The three apostles are terrified. Peter blurts out that it is good for them to be there, and he offers to make three dwellings: one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Then a cloud overshadows them, and a voice from the cloud says “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” When the theophany is over, and the apostles come down the mountain, Jesus orders them to tell no one about this until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.

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What is the significance of the Transfiguration for our lives today? This is a particularly important question for those of us who worship at a parish that is named after this event!

Most people think that the Transfiguration is about a change, or transformation, in Jesus. That certainly makes sense when you look at the artwork about the Transfiguration. If you look at the carving above our high altar, or the stained glass window in the mortuary chapel behind the organ, or even the cover of today's bulletin, you'll see that Jesus is always depicted as being transfigured, or transformed, by the divine light.

But if you think about it, Jesus is actually the same before, during, and after the Transfiguration. He was, is, and always will be the Word of God. As Andreas Andreopoulos, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, put it: "Jesus did not change who he was; he was God before, during, and after his Transfiguration, as he was during his entire ministry, fully divine and fully human."

So, what if we viewed the Transfiguration in a slightly different way? What if we understood the Transfiguration not only as the transformation of Jesus, but also as the transformation of *Peter, James, and John*? Andreopoulos writes:

What changed was the perceptive capability of the apostles. Each of them was given the grace to see and hear differently, and because of that they were able to see Jesus in a different way.

Andreopoulos concludes: "To the extent that Transfiguration means a change of something [into that which did not exist before], the actual transfiguration happened in Peter, John, and James, and not in Jesus."

The Greek word for transfiguration is *metamorphoō*, from which we get the English word "metamorphosis." That word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the transformation that we undergo as followers of Christ. We are called, in the words of the Collect of the Day, to be "changed into [Jesus'] likeness from glory to glory" over the course of our lifetime.

Just as we can't detect the glow of human bodies with the unaided eye, Peter, James, and John couldn't detect the full divinity of Christ until they had their mountain-top experience. At the Transfiguration, they were given the grace to "see and hear differently." And, as a result of that grace, they ended up transfiguring the world.

February is African-American history month. It is fitting that, on Tuesday, the Episcopal Church will celebrate the Feast of Blessed Absalom Jones, who was the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church.

Yesterday, a contingent from our parish, led by Dr. Philip Spivey and Fr. John David, attended the annual diocesan celebration of this feast day at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Like Peter, James, and John, Absalom Jones received the transfiguring grace to “see and hear differently,” and he in turn transfigured the world.

Born a slave in 1746, Jones was separated from his birth family at an early age. He worked many years to purchase his freedom, and he became a lay minister at an interracial Methodist congregation in Philadelphia. One Sunday in 1787, Jones and his fellow African-American members were told by the white members of the congregation that they could no longer sit or pray on the first floor of the church. They were literally pulled off their knees and directed to sit in the balcony.

Instead of putting up with this humiliation, Jones and the African-American members of the congregation walked out of the church right then and there. They ended up founding the first African-American parish in the Episcopal Church, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia. Jones was eventually ordained a priest in the Diocese of Pennsylvania in 1805 and served as the rector of that parish until his death in 1818.

The story of Absalom Jones is a powerful example of the grace of the Transfiguration. Like Peter, James, and John, Jones and his fellow parishioners were given the grace to “see and hear differently” on that fateful Sunday morning in 1787. As a result of that grace, they refused to accept the status quo and to be treated as second-class citizens. They were transfigured by the light of Christ, and they in turn transfigured the world.

In just three days it will be Ash Wednesday, and we will begin the liturgical descent from the mountain top of the Transfiguration to the valley of Good Friday and the crucifixion. On Ash Wednesday, we will be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Now, although it is true that we are dust, we must also remember that we carry within us the divine light. We do glow, after all. That is the lesson of the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. So perhaps we are not just dust, but rather star dust. May the divine light of Christ strengthen and sustain us during the forty days of Lent and during all the challenging times in our lives.

At the heart of the Transfiguration is the grace to be transformed and to “see and hear differently.” As such, the Transfiguration is actually a lifetime journey and not a one-time event. May we, in the words of the Collect of the Day, always be “changing into Christ’s likeness from glory to glory.” And may we, like Peter, James, and John – and Blessed Absalom Jones – always be open to this transfiguring grace in our lives.