

Introduction

As you might know, I'm often cautious about what to say from the pulpit on the Sunday following a significant news event or national crisis. It's not always clear so soon after the fact what the *gospel* has to say to the issue at hand. It's not always clear what the *Spirit* is asking of us in that moment. And yet, at times, one cannot remain silent.

Our hearts are heavy this morning after an exhausting, horrifying week as we watched Europe in real-time sink into war, the most significant security threat to Europe and the world since World War II. What has been and is being unleashed against the people of Ukraine is pure evil—evil that must be denounced and resisted. The trauma now being inflicted upon a people that carries the trauma exacted on it by Stalin in the 1930s and actual Nazis in the 1940s is overwhelming to imagine. Consider the destruction, the amount of pain and suffering endured by innocent people, both in Ukraine and Russia. Consider the refugees, mothers, and children separated from husbands and fathers. Consider the elderly and sick who cannot leave Ukraine. We have heard extraordinary stories of heroism and courage this week and we can take heart from them. Still, we must be sober-minded. This morning, Pope Francis called the conflict in Ukraine “diabolical.” He said, “Those who wage war forget humanity.” The Pope called President Zelensky this past week to express his sorrow. By contrast, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church supported Putin’s vision of “one people,” meaning Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. He warned of “dark and hostile external forces seeking to divide our common historical fatherland.”

The Church always needs to be wary of Christian nationalism. It's always a deadly cocktail.

In this time of crisis let us listen for the Word of God in the words. Today is Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday. I'm not sure what this text or this sermon will speak to how you're feeling today. Perhaps it's difficult to focus. And that's okay. Today's text and sermon are about light, changing perspectives—transfigurations—discovering what is below the surface, what is not immediately apparent to us or in plain sight. They speak to the way God's presence surprises us—even scares us—and gives hope.

May we hear something that will allow us and empower us—thousands of miles from Kyiv—to do our part in the work of reconciliation, peace, and healing.

Transfigured Perceptions

Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration of the Lord/27th February 2022

On this Sunday we enter a space between the season of Epiphany, which manifests the appearance of God's light into the world, and the season of Lent, a somber, often dark, ashen and ash-like time leading to the cross. We stand in the threshold between Epiphany and Lent in this transitional, liminal space. And for a moment, the lectionary leads us up to a high mountain for an encounter with the light of God. In the Bible, mountains are often liminal spaces, thresholds, where two worlds meet, a place of revelation, and therefore holy. Think of Mt. Sinai where Moses encountered God in the clouds (Ex. 19 and 34).

Tradition has it that Jesus was transfigured on Mt. Tabor. The Jewish historian Josephus (37-c.100), however, tells us that there was a fortress built on Mt. Tabor, so that can't be correct. Luke simply says Jesus, Peter, James, and John "went up on the mountain to pray" (Lk. 9:28). Both Matthew and Mark tell us it was "a high mountain apart" (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2). Tabor isn't that high. It's more like a big hill in the Galilee. There is a high mountain not far from there. Mt. Hermon rises 9,000 feet above sea level. That's where I imagine all this occurring, on a high, remote, wild place, somewhere between heaven and earth.

But what took place? It would take a lifetime to fathom this question. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree: Jesus was transfigured. Because Mark was written around 70, we know that this tradition is early, very close to Jesus. The story is missing from John's Gospel. Although it could be argued that all of John's gospel is the story of Jesus' transfiguration. The prologue tells us, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3b-5).

All the Gospel writers describe Jesus as having some relation to light—Jesus as light, Jesus as conduit of light, Jesus as source of light who allows us to see. Luke tells us that the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white (Lk. 9:29). Matthew tells us, "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun" (Mt. 17:2).

We could say it was an *epiphany*. *Theophany* is probably a better word, meaning a vision or appearance of God. It doesn't matter. Epiphany or theophany—words are inadequate. Its oddness and strangeness should not be managed, contained, or

domesticated. It's a mystery. There's no parallel to this in the history of world religions. The idea of a dying and rising god, for example, is not unique to the Christian story. But nothing compares to what we find here.¹ Humans witnessing the presence of God. A human being whose appearance is transfigured, revealing the essential nature of this human being participating presently in the very being and light of God. In this event, the past (represented by Moses and Elijah), and the present (represented by Peter, James, and John, and Jesus) are both *relativized*. Past and present are all relativized in that moment by the constant speed of light. Light unites them. As Albert Einstein (1879-1955) showed, light is the constant of the universe. Everything—*everything*—exists vis-à-vis our relation to light, especially time.

Jesus is revealed as the constant of the universe and, like light is ever faithful, who as the Son is at the same time mediating the uncreated Light of God.² Here Peter, James, and John witness Jesus *becoming* light, Jesus and God *sharing* in light; they witness Jesus' eternal embodiment as fully divine and fully human. "This is my Son, the Beloved, the Chosen; Listen to him!" They see the light of Jesus *opening* reality to them—to us—transfiguring our perceptions, allowing us to see the light that permeates all things, and illuminating a new future for us.

And it's stunning to think that the apostle Paul makes a similar claim— "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 3:6). Stunning since Paul never read any of the Gospels.

And we might have an even earlier reference to Jesus and light. In December 1945, farmers in Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt along the Nile River, discovered a sealed earthenware jar containing thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices, together with pages torn from another book, including a complete text of the Gospel of Thomas in Coptic from 320 A.D. Scholars knew about this Gospel for centuries, had fragments of it, but not the entire Gospel. Scholars believe Thomas was written as early as 60, so perhaps before Mark, and as late as 125 AD. Thomas consists entirely of sayings (*logia*) of Jesus, without the narrative structure of the New Testament Gospels. We studied Thomas on Thursday mornings, several years ago. Many of the sayings, however, ascribed to Jesus are *exactly* the same or close to what we have in the New Testament. Others reflect an image of the Cosmic Christ that we find in John 1 and Colossians.

Listen to these sayings. Could the Transfiguration have inspired them? In Logion (saying) 77, Jesus says, *I am the light shining upon all things. I am the sum of everything. For*

everything has come forth from me, and towards me everything unfolds. Split a piece of wood, and there I am. Pick up a stone and you will find me there.

Or what about this one, from Logion 24? "His student said to him, 'Take us to the place where you are, since we are required to seek after it.' He answered them, 'Whoever has an ear for this should listen carefully! Light shines out from the center of a being of light and illuminates the whole cosmos. Who ever fails to become light is a source of darkness.'"

Or this one, Logion 83: "Jesus says, Images are revealed to humanity while the light within them is hidden by the brilliance of the Father's light. It is God who is being revealed, but the image of God remains concealed by the blaze of light."³^[2]

Echoes of the transfiguration?

In the long history of the Church, the Eastern Church (Byzantine, Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, Serbian Orthodox traditions) has always had an intense fascination with the meaning and wisdom of the Transfiguration. The Western Church (both Roman Catholics and Protestants) have largely ignored it. The Western Church has emphasized rules and morality (correct belief, correct behavior), whereas the Eastern Church has always been more mystical and experiential. Do a Google search for *Transfiguration icons* and you'll see how vital the Transfiguration is in the Eastern Church. The West has much to learn from the East here.

I never heard much about the Transfiguration growing up. It's tough to preach on this text, it's tough to make sense of it. But what if we're not meant to make sense of it? Peter couldn't make sense of it. He was dumbfounded. What if, instead, we're called to enter this experience, be confused and dumbfounded by it? What if we set aside our rational, hyper-critical, cynical approach to things and open our hearts and eyes to see from *within* the perspective of the experience? What if we opened ourselves to the seemingly irrational, to the mystical, to the unknown, to experiences that bring us to the edge of our knowing, where we're blinded by his light, swallowed by the light, and come to see from *within* the light, participating within the light?

There's an ancient text from the Armenian Church (first translated into English in 1924), known as *The Revelation of the Lord to St. Peter*, which describes the Christian life as *participating* in "the luminous mystery." The "luminous mystery of the children of light...and with the same light they were illumined and illumined until the second epiphany of that light."⁴ The Eastern tradition affirmed that Jesus was transfigured so that when *we* stand or kneel in his presence, we too might be transfigured, transformed

by his light. His light yields light and thus illumines our lives. Light revealing light. That's who Jesus is. That's what Jesus does. That's what our lives can experience in the light of his presence when we, too, are transfigured. Light illuminating light. Doesn't the psalmist say, "For with you," O God, "is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Ps. 36:9)?

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) tells the story when he was in a dark toolshed. "The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it" or with it.

"Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes," that is looking into the beam of light. "Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experience."⁵

Lewis shows that there are two different ways of knowing. One is through observation from the outside—looking *at* the beam of light. The other is participation from inside the beam of light, *with* the light. Observation from the outside is looking at Jesus from a distance, as in studying the scriptures to learn *about* him in an objective, scientific approach. There's value in this approach, of course, but this way alone is insufficient. It doesn't show us everything. The second way of knowing is by participating in the light, with the light, from inside the light.

The shift from observing Jesus from the outside to seeing with him from within the light, from inside who he really is, participating in the light, changes our perspective of God, the world, ourselves. The shift from looking *at* Jesus to looking *with* Jesus will change how we see everything. To move from the outside to the inside is transfiguration. To make this move in our own lives, from looking *at* to looking *with* Jesus is what it means for us to be transfigured. When light reveals light and everything around us and within us changes, and we, too, shine like the sun.



Image: “Transfiguration” icon by contemporary artist Ivanka Demchuk who lives Lviv, Ukraine. I’m grateful to my friend Brian Zahnd, pastor of Word of Life Church (@WOLC) in St. Joseph, MO, for introducing me to the work of this artist. Here is a link to her website and portfolio: <https://en.ivankademchuk.com/ivankademchukportfolio>.

¹ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 35ff.

² See Thomas F. Torrance, “A Theology of Light’: A University Sermon,” in *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science*, Introduction by W. Jim Neidhardt (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 154-155. On the use of Torrance’s theology of light as way to approach the meaning of transfiguration, see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 194-198.

³ The Gospel of Thomas quotations come from Lynn Bauman’s beautiful translation, *The Gospel of Thomas: Wisdom of the Twin – A Dynamic Translation with Commentary and Notes* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2004).

⁴ Cited in Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009).

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” originally published in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* (July 17, 1945), reprinted in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, 212-215).