

Weighty God

March 2, 2025

Don't Miss It

Our church celebrates the Transfiguration today. I have to admit that this is one of those yearly celebrations that I think a lot of people find it hard to connect to. I mean, come on — I won't even ask for a show of hands; I'm pretty confident that not a single one of you imagine that you'll ever be so transformed by a trip up a mountain that you become as radiant as the sun. Nor, for that matter, do you expect to witness that happening to someone else.

All too often, when we use churchy words like “transfiguration,” it makes people's eyes glaze over, or what's worse for a preacher, makes people start counting items in the church. How many stone blocks are there in the arch that leads to the chancel? How many people are in this stained glass window or that? I know that the struggle is real.

So let's break Transfiguration down into something that might actually be useful. Do you remember the 1986 movie, “Ferris Bueller's Day Off?” Ostensibly, it's about a kid who's a master manipulator skipping school for an epic last hurrah before adulthood kicks in.

But in the opening monologue, as Ferris tells us that he is faking being sick for the 9th time this semester, he throws in a line that reveals that the movie isn't merely slapstick comedy, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it.”

Not only does that set up cinematic gold, it's also great spirituality. “Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it.”

If “Ferris Bueller's Day Off” is too lowbrow to be a spiritual touchstone for you, I'll remind you that he's echoing Gerard Manley Hopkins, “There lives a dearest freshness deep down things.” If Transfiguration makes people's eyes glaze over, so does the word glory. Glory makes me think of Bruce Springsteen and thirty-year-olds “trying to recapture a little of the glory.” Not exactly the stuff of inspiration.

And while the word that is translated as “glory” in the New Testament does mean “radiant” and “splendor” just as we would expect, that Greek word was often translated from the Hebrew word which means “to have weight.” (I'm quite aware that I've been speaking about how dull some of this stuff can seem and then I lean into Greek and Hebrew translations. The irony isn't lost on me.) But what if we understood “glory” not only as radiance, but also as weightiness, as profundity?

Nichola Torbett, one of the writers at *enfleshed*, broke this open for me:

“Glory, then, is the aspect of something or someone that knocks you back, in a good way, by its power and realness and truth. It's the beauty of a sunrise so brilliant that it lifts you out of your internal chatter and makes you feel things you otherwise can't access. It's the theater production that cracks you open, giving you access to understanding that was in you, but you didn't know it. It's the last line of a poem that opens up a grief you didn't even know was there—a grief

you've been needing to feel, maybe, for decades." That's glory! And in the wake of experiencing glory, everything seems more beautiful and precious."

One aspect of Transfiguration that often gets short shrift is to recognize God's glory all around us, to pause to soak in the grandeur of God and creation, to bask in just how sacred every little thing around us actually is.

False Gods

This spirituality of weighty glory, of paying attention and opening ourselves to the sacred in our midst is good and important, but it's not enough, especially this year. That's why I'm grateful that our Gospel is paired with the passage David read from Exodus, where we hear of Moses' radiance when he comes down the mountain after being face to face with God and receiving the Ten Commandments. He is glowing!

It's a much smaller scale, but have you ever encountered someone who is just radiant? Maybe they're pregnant or have found new love? Those are probably the two most common times we will say that someone is glowing.

The glory of God that is radiating out of Moses is trillions of times more brilliant than that. It's so brilliant that he has to wear a mask when he's talking with people now, in order that they can even be in his presence. It's like a lampshade, a filter. Moses has just encountered the Living God! Has just been face to face with the Creator, with Ultimate reality, and now that he's down amongst the people again, he has to dial back how that experience is radiating out of him.

In order to wrap our minds around why the people can't handle Moses' brilliance, we need to remember that just a few passages before the one we read today, the people grew so impatient waiting for Moses' return that they created the golden calf to worship. Instead of holding out for something that was actually worshipable, something that was actually sacred, they made their own god.

We do that, don't we? What are some of the false gods people worship today? Money, power, fame, pleasure, entertainment, violence, guns, phones, youth. People worship achievement and the economy.

Now here's the thing. When you worship something, you not only give it your attention, you also give it your allegiance. You're devoted to it. And, it becomes incredibly awkward, even painful, when you encounter something more worthy, because that challenges your loyalty and fidelity to the original thing you had been worshipping.

An encounter with something that is actually sacred is devastating to a false god. What's unfortunate is that, all too often, rather than switching our allegiance to the sacred, rather than turning toward the true God and God's ways, we behave like the people at the base of Mount Sinai. We filter our experience of God, rather than absorb the full weight of it. We'd rather Moses wear a mask than turn away from the false gods we've made.

The uncomfortable fact is that far too many of us are more comfortable with the god of our own making, the one that promises wealth and prosperity and security, the one that preserves what I

have, the one who is shiny but possesses no real, weighty glory. The mess that our society is in is rooted in this devotion to gods of our own making, rather than the weighty, true God.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said:

“That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our life and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

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Conclusion

The challenge the Transfiguration sets up for us, then, is twofold. Recognizing the sacred in our midst, allowing ourselves to be bowled over and opened up by the beauty and majesty of the divine that weaves its way through all of existence is a radical act. It is a spirituality that has the power to keep our heads above water amidst the roiling seas of our age. But that has to be paired with a brutal honesty and severance from our allegiance to false gods. If we are going to collaborate with Jesus in the building up of the reign of God, it's not enough to lament the state of the world. We must recognize, acknowledge, and sever our allegiance to the false gods.

Ash Wednesday is this week, inviting us into a season of introspection, repentance, and conversion. We would do well to tee up that season by examining our complicity with the false gods of this age. We may not be Christian nationalists, but how are we allowing, enabling, and maybe even benefitting from their hateful rhetoric? We may not be oligarchs, but how are we propping them up? We may not think that we're worshipping at the altar of money or power or looks or youth or violence, but when we allow those things to dominate our imaginations, they come to dominate our character as well.

So much of what commands the news cycle right now is about systemic change, and while that is important, internal transformation is critical as well. So, as we step toward Lent, let us be fierce about our false gods, be fierce about why we feel the need for veils between ourselves and the sacred. In doing so, it is my prayer that we will not only emerge stronger and wiser at Easter, we will have come so close to the Living God that we, too, will radiate love, mercy, compassion, and grace. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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