

February 11, 2024  
Transfiguration Sunday and Pledge Dedication  
*“How the Whole Story Changes Things”*  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Mark 8:27-9:8

---

Did you enjoy the sunshine this past week? I’ve heard so many people say that this year, in particular, they’ve been feeling those seasonal effects that bring us down. When the skies are gray and things are cold, our spirits can feel a bit depressed, too. Soup and hot cocoa, blankets and cozy fireplaces are helpful, but sunshine seems to be the best antidote. While the world out there remains the same: busy schedules, doctor appointments, the same old problems, when the sun is shining, all of that stuff feels different. Our outlook is brighter and our ability to make our way through it feels somehow more manageable. The light transforms what we see, so we see it differently, anew.

When Jesus went up the mountain, he shined in glory. His clothes were so full of light they were almost blinding. He seemed, to his disciples, to glow in radiance. This was the same Jesus. The one who had been teaching, preaching, healing all over the countryside. But on this day, he no longer looked like a regular rabbi. He appeared with a holy luminosity. That light transformed him, so that his disciples, and us, see him differently, anew.

When the glowing stopped and they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered his friends not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had risen from the dead. Biblical scholars call this the Messianic Secret. Jesus was always telling people not to tell, not to talk about the healing and holy things he was doing. For us today, these directions are confusing and frustrating. We know we are supposed to be talking about Jesus, telling people what he has done, inviting friends to church. So why is this scripture passage telling us to shut up?

It seems that Jesus didn’t want people talking about him until they could see the full picture. Until the painting of him was complete, so to speak. The disciples were seeing his public ministry of service - his teaching, preaching, healing. His transfiguration on the mountain allowed them to more fully glimpse him in his glory. The way that light shined

<sup>1</sup> William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 118.

on him changed their perception and their experience of Jesus. But Jesus kept pointing to another part of the portrait, too. The part where he was going to be arrested and killed and would rise again from the dead. Scholars agree that this is the reason Jesus didn't want people talking yet. Although his glory was hinted at on the mountain in his transfiguration, it wasn't fully revealed until his death and resurrection. To know Jesus, to understand him, and to follow him, we have to see all those pieces of the image together.

For us in 2024, we have all those brush strokes in front us. And so we can tell the news, we can talk about what we've seen. But our telling needs to include all those angles: love, life, service, suffering, glory. All of those together create a picture of what abundant life is like. The abundant life we enjoy, and the abundant life we seek to live out, too.

Did we catch a glimpse of that abundance today at the baptismal font? Did we see Christ's radiance emanating from the tiny faces and fingers of Fiona and Flynn? Are we seeing that abundance in the pen strokes and imagination of Lauren as she creates before us today? Are we hearing it in the notes and words of the choir, reminding us that God has made a place for everyone—everyone—at the table? God's light is shining, helping us to see Jesus and his invitation to us more clearly.

And yet, and yet, that picture of abundant life is only complete as it gets told alongside Jesus' service, humility, and sacrifice. Today, we are thinking about how abundant life is particularly revealed through justice and love. When we live out justice and love, it often looks to the outside more like drudgery, like dying-to-self, rather than being robed-in-glory. But our ability to experience abundance in our actions of justice and love, in our service to others, depends on how we are viewing it. What is the lighting like? Are we seeing our service through the rays of Christ's blinding light, like on that mountaintop? Or do we only experience serving others through the dark clouds of gray?

When we view our service in the light that Christ shines, living out our faith reveals that abundance. Sacrifices that might feel painful by themselves seem to be worth it. Choices that would otherwise feel fraught, feel easier. Taking those actions in the brightness of Jesus' love changes our perception. As Commentator William Placher writes, "We do all sorts of things when we are in love, and we count them as joy...Similarly, those who have given themselves to following Jesus...manifest joy in the midst of what looks to the outsider like suffering. Those who lose their lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, Jesus says, will save their lives."<sup>1</sup> The kind of saving Jesus offers is not just about your eternal soul. To be

saved is to have wholeness, health, integrity, peace, maybe that sense of abundance. And to have that right now, as we live and serve together.

Sometimes it's easy to see a hard situation transformed by viewing it in the light. Sometimes the sacrificial acts of service and justice are clearly transformed by the joy of doing them out of deepest faith.

One of our church's mission partners is the Here to Help Foundation, based right here in Royal Oak. They minister to citizens returning to life in the community after having been incarcerated. We support them with financial donations, and with the use of our parking lot. The leader of Here to Help is Bob Schwarz, and he personally meets these citizens in our church's parking lot for a few minutes each afternoon. He has found that face to face interactions and direct aid, like gift cards to purchase work boots, or help securing a vehicle to get to work are what these folks really need to get on their feet. Which is overwhelmingly what they all want to do.

The frigid, gray weather of January was especially hard on Bob's client. But Bob and Here to Help were able to make that cold look and feel different, by shining light, love, and justice into those folks' lives. Here's how Bob tells it in their recent newsletter: "It was a particularly cold January with lots of below zero wind chill days. Some returning citizens work outside and others travel to work and back by walking to the bus and then having to wait for the bus. They are battling the elements and many do not have a winter coat. Last month, when we were meeting people in person, it was clear who needed a winter coat and we kept our vehicle well stocked with new coats at all times. We were able to provide a whopping **159 winter coats** to people in need. This unanticipated gift left people a bit speechless, very appreciative and very happy." The newsletter included a picture collage with photos of about 50 of those people, each one wearing their new coat. The light shines from the pictures. This small act of justice and love transforms how the cold feels. You can see the transformation in people's eyes. You can see a glimpse of abundance, even knowing the tough situation most of those folks still face.

As many of us make our pledges to God and the church this season, we do so in a spirit of joy, of sacrifice, of knowing that giving away what we have is not easy. And yet it feels different because we do it in the light of Christ's love. Just as the portrait of Jesus is only complete when we see both the glory and the sacrifice, living an abundant life of faith includes both of those things for us, too. And it's my prayer that we sense that abundance as we give of ourselves here, and out in the community. Knowing that Christ's light is shining while we serve and live and love.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.