

SERMON- Transfiguration (A)
Charles R. Cowherd

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Peter 1:13-21

Luke 9:28-36

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
July 16, 2023

Psalms 99:5-9

OPENING:

Today is August 6th, the Feast of the Transfiguration, the day where Jesus revealed himself as different as before, but also as who really was.

He appeared in dazzling white, on a mountaintop with the prophets of yore.

It was a moment so inspiring because it's where God meets man, the divine meets the human, where heaven and earth collide.

TRANSFIGURATION:

Today is August 6th, the Feast of the Transfiguration.

It's also my birthday. And this is one of my favorite passages, my favorite past time as a kid being to flip through the prayer book during boring sermons and find something interesting. This day, according to the Collect, of "raiment", this day where God interrupts the "disquietude" of the world. It's a story so amazing that sometimes the Biblical scholars say that this could not have happened in Jesus' ministry, that this is a RESURRECTION story, that was later moved backwards.

HYMN SING:

At the 10 AM, folks won't hear this sermon because instead we are going to do a "hymn sing" where members of the congregation are going to shout out hymn numbers for Todd to play.

The joke this week has been that this Hymn Sing is Todd and St. Timothy's gift to me, giving me a Sunday off from preaching.

But here I am.

It actually come about because we saw another church doing it and we thought, there is no Sunday more appropriate than Transfiguration Sunday to do the Hymn Sing, because of music's ability to change people, to transform, to transfigure people, to help us understand God's message through song.

So I invite you back at 10 AM for the Hymn Sing, knowing full well that many people choose this service because it does NOT have music.

So here we are.

Please know I don't think you come to this service because you don't want to be transfigured.

I think you come at 8am for the same reason that Clergy tend to love the 8 AM

service.

It's not about the time, Clergy love it because it's the distilled message. There is no fluff, extra additives. It's just the lessons, God's Word, the liturgy, unadorned, and ideally a sermon that shines bright .

It's God's message delivered in concentrate, with no need for a laborious Passing of the Peace, or a complicated organ recital, or cute children.

Most of those things feed my Low Church heart.

Give me the Gospel with no additives. Give me the simplicity of liturgical worship.

You don't need fireworks, you don't need pyrotechnics, no crutches to lean on.

I am preaching to choir, I hope. Rite I, no music, less folks to distract, like the disciples you might be weighted down by sleep still but it's transfiguration enough.

Clergy also love 8 o'clock because, and I will say this carefully, there is less yo-

yoing between BIG SUNDAYS and then a normal Sunday. At 8 o'clock, every

Sunday is a feast day. Clergy love 8 o'clockers because, and I will say this more

carefully, you are faithful, you come week after week, and you are mature (not just in age.)

BIRTHDAY

So Happy Feast of the Transfiguration, here on August 6th.

I so appreciated Eric Barr's message a couple weeks back about LEMing, about the "we few, we happy few" who serve at the altar and how that transfigures one's experience on Sundays, with God and with one another.

I mention this because another birthday gift to me this Sunday is that we are going to have youth acolytes at our 10 AM. Right after this service, Danny is training some young people to serve at the altar. I am so excited for them and us because I served as an acolyte growing up and I remembering it being life-changing and transfiguring for me as a young person.

This was St. Stephen's Culpeper, VA, not a grand cathedral or anything, but I remember Bishop Lee telling our acolyte leader: "St. Stephen's has the best acolytes in the Diocese." And how proud I was.

It was not until I was much older, a few more birthdays, that someone told me that he probably told that to all the churches in his visits around the Diocese. Didn't matter. I got to carry the cross, and lead people into worship, there is no promotion from that.

SHRINEMONT:

Coming up on August 6th, 2025 will be the 100th Anniversary of Shrinemont, our Diocesan Camps and Conference center. It shares a birthday with me and this Feast Day because it bears the official name the Cathedral Shrine of the Transfiguration

for obvious reasons.

Again, it's the Low Church tradition of Virginia that we don't have a grand building with elaborate stained glass and ornate architecture as the spiritual center of our Diocesan life. When building cathedrals started to become the thing in the Episcopal Church, this happened with the High Church/Anglo-Catholic movement, and the Diocese of Virginia was faced with that choice where to put ours, in other words, where to erect tents and booths and to try to center God's house in one specific. So Virginia said, we are going to put ours on the side of a mountain in an open-air, bare bones space.

I remember as a camper at Shrinemont, hearing Bishop Lee say the joke once, or maybe I heard him say it a thousand times, in his stentorian accent, and summoning all the gravitas of his episcopal authority:

“Whenever I go to bishop's meetings across the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, I tell the Bishops and Deans of the Cathedrals at St. John the Divine in New York City and Canterbury and St. Paul's in London, that MY CATHEDRAL has the highest ceiling in the world!”

Everyone would laugh (more than you just did) and we would crane our eyes up, looking past the stone cross of the Cathedral Shrine, and past the trees, and then towards the blue sky, where heaven meets earth, human meets divine.

Today is the Feast of the Transfiguration, I have spent so many summers in my life at Shrinemont, hearing sermons on the Feast of the Transfiguration. I love this Sunday so much, that I could go on and on this morning about it. I am kind of sad not to preach again at the 10 AM.

I remember one sermon from this day at Shrinemont again, I am a counselor now. And I am sitting next to Bishop Lee in the outdoor chapel. And the preacher is talking about this day, the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6th. And talking about how it's also the day that the United States dropped the 1st atomic bomb on Hiroshima, August 6th, 1945, and he connected it somehow to Jesus'

Transfiguration, this gigantic burst of light, revealing who we were, in our glory and our pain. (I cannot wait to see *Oppenheimer* by the way, to get my sermon for Transfiguration for next year)

This preacher also mentioned that August 6th, 1991, was the day that the first page on the World Wide Web was formed. TIMOTHY Berners-Lee put something up on the internet on this day 32 years ago. There are now 2 billion.

The preacher that day was again making this point about the internet being born, and this big burst of light, for better or worse made its way throughout the world.

CONCLUSION

Enough stories, 8 o'clockers, you don't want to hear all that, you want the Gospel undistilled, you want robust Biblical exegesis delivered in a concentrated beam of light.

I mentioned at the start of my sermon that this story happens in our Gospel narrative at kind of the midpoint of Jesus' ministry. But some scholars say it really belongs after he has been crucified and resurrected.

Think about it:

Both stories occur on mountains.

In this story, Jesus appears between the two prophets, whereas Jesus is crucified between two thieves.

In this story, Jesus is clothed in white, on the cross he is naked

This scene is blinding/ whereas there is darkness at the Resurrection

Here, Peter wants to build tents/ there Peter flees.

Here God speaks/ there God is silent.

Who really knows if this happened before or after?

But can you feel the disciples blinking their eyes, in this cinematic way, and seeing Jesus dying, being crucified and the anguish, but then them seeing Jesus revealed as God's son, as the 2nd Person of the Trinity, in all this glory. It's overwhelming for me to just retell it, what was it like to live it. It must have been disorienting, transforming, transfiguring. It makes no sense. This person, this friend and teacher, this person you were putting all your hopes and dreams in, wait a second, he is the Messiah, but more, he is Son of God, now he is dying, now he is risen.

AMEN