

Feast of the Transfiguration, transferred
Luke 9:28-36
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Aug. 5, 2007
The Rev. John Spicer

Windows Onto the Glory of God

I'd like to tell you about an experience I've had a couple of times in this room over the past few weeks. It has to do with the stained-glass windows over the altar, those images of Jesus and Peter and Andrew.

During the liturgy a couple of Sundays ago, as we were singing the Gloria, I happened to look up at those windows. And what I saw made me do a double-take. With no warning, and with no divine commentary, the images in those windows had changed, at least to my eyes. Instead of what I always see when I look up there, I now saw the images of Jesus and Peter and Andrew in three dimensions. They seemed to be coming out of the background surrounding them, as if I were wearing 3-D glasses at the new Harry Potter movie. I looked away, out toward the congregation, thinking something was up with my eyes; but all of you looked like you always do. So I looked back to the windows, and there they were in 3-D again. It was simply glorious, a gracious moment of connection with God that I had done nothing to bring about. I can't explain how it felt, other than to say it was a time out of time. It wasn't that I felt like I was in heaven as much as it felt like heaven had come to me.

When I came back to work on Tuesday, I came in here again for the Intercessory Prayer group. I really didn't want to look at the windows for fear that the images of Jesus and Peter and Andrew would have gone back to normal. But I did look, and they had gone back to normal. The windows were their old, lovely, two-dimensional selves. And they stayed that way all through the week – until the next Sunday, when they were back in 3-D once again.

I have no rationalistic explanation for this, and honestly I don't want one. Of course, the windows didn't change in any way. The sunlight didn't change that much from one day to the next – and then back again a week later. God's presence in this place certainly didn't change; the light of Christ always shines through those windows. But for a few moments, God gave me the gift of seeing something new in them, the gift of seeing them in a new and more intense way. In those moments, the presence and power of Christ in this place became just that much more real to me. You never know what God might have in store for you when you show up here on a Sunday morning....

Well, today we're celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, and I think my experience with these windows gives us a window into this odd and glorious story. Jesus takes his closest disciples with him "up on the mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28). We aren't told whether Jesus is expecting anything out of the ordinary from his brief retreat, but the disciples certainly aren't. They pray with him for a while but eventually fall asleep up there on the mountain. But when they wake up, they see something they could never have expected. Jesus' face has changed, just as happened to Moses when he went to speak with God face to face; and the appearance of his clothes has become dazzling white; and he's standing there with Moses and Elijah, the embodiments of the Law and the Prophets, the symbols of God's long-standing covenant with God's people.

Peter, like so many of us, finds it necessary to say *something* in this moment when he doesn't know what to say. He's astounded by what he sees; but at the same time, he's afraid that it will slip away. So he wants to preserve the moment by putting up three tents to honor Jesus and Moses and Elijah. As an old friend of mine used to say when his wife would ask him to take photo after photo during special occasions, Peter was trying to take a picture of how it felt to be there.

But instead, God interrupts Peter's photo shoot and lets the three disciples know *why* all this is happening. They're not simply being given a "mountaintop experience." They're in the presence of God's own Son, now suddenly revealed in his true divine glory; and they need to pay attention to what he's been saying.

Now, in today's story, Jesus hasn't said a word. But just before this reading, he has said quite a lot. There, Peter has named Jesus as the messiah, and Jesus responds with, "Yes, but..." He *is* the messiah, but being the messiah means suffering and dying and *then* rising in resurrected glory. And, he continues, becoming his follower means losing your own life daily on the way to gaining eternal life. All that light and the thunder on the mountaintop are there to underline this truth: that for both the messiah and his followers, the life of faith is all about dying to this world and rising again in resurrected glory.

Well, this morning, at the 10:15 liturgy, we'll get a glimpse of what that resurrected life looks like. We have three baptisms this morning, which is why the furniture is a little different up here than usual. I'd like to submit to you that baptism is much more than a social rite of passage. It's much more than just a ritual of initiation into this group, the Church. Baptism is a moment of dying and rising again in resurrected glory. Even though this font is too small for anyone actually to go under the water and come back up again, that's exactly what's happening when we pour dainty shellfulls of water onto the heads of beautiful babies. As the prayer book puts it, in baptism they are being "buried with Christ in his death." By it, they are "shar[ing] in his resurrection." Through it, they are being "reborn by the Holy Spirit." And as transformed, resurrected people, they will "continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior." (*Book of Common Prayer* 306-307)

In fact, I think we can even say that baptism is our own moment of transfiguration. When we come up out of the baptismal waters, we're still the same people – but not *exactly* the same. As baptized people, we are cleansed from sin; we are adopted as God's own children; and we are reborn as part of Christ's body, living and active in the world. And though we can't always see it with our limited powers of perception, a new light shines within us. When we present baptismal candles to the candidates and their families, we say something like, "Receive the light of Christ, that you may reveal his light to the world." That light we bear as God's adopted children is a tiny spark of the divine glory that blazed forth from God's own Child 2,000 years ago on that mountaintop.

Now, we don't reveal that glory 100 percent of the time. In fact, for most of us, most of the time, we're caught up in the daily grind, doing our best just to do our best – checking things off our to-do lists, scurrying to the next appointment, responding to the crisis du jour.

But then, there are those moments when the light of Christ blazes within us, radiating out to a world that may be very surprised to see it. Maybe we share with a friend how we have felt the hand of God guiding us through a particular moment in our life. Maybe we speak a word of healing to someone who feels lost and alone. Maybe we take responsibility for things that we've done or things we haven't done, and ask forgiveness from a person we've hurt, and thereby save a relationship rather than walking away from it. Maybe we make the life of our congregation a

priority in our own lives, really investing ourselves in God's work in this place. Maybe, in an everyday conversation, we take a stand that affirms the full humanity of someone our culture would like to keep on the sidelines because of their sexuality or the color of their skin. Maybe, as Mother Anne said last week, we share our daily bread with someone in Haiti, or Darfur, or Kansas City, and thereby say out loud that everyone, everywhere is our brother or our sister – and that when we serve them, we serve Christ himself.

That's what it looks like to live in the transfiguration that comes to us in baptism. Every time we witness a baptism and affirm our Baptismal Covenant, we remind ourselves that this is what it means to become a follower of Jesus – to continue in the worship and fellowship of the apostles, to resist evil and repent from sin, to proclaim God's good news to others, to serve Christ in all people, and to strive for justice and peace. These are the ways that God's glory shines forth from us. These are the ways that we embody that simple prayer we say when we give a small candle to a new Christian: May you reveal the light of Christ to the world.

We each have a share in the glory of God. And we each have a part to play in God's work of redeeming and transforming the world as we know it. To us, God's beloved, adopted children, God entrusts the day-to-day work of losing our lives that we might gain the fullness of life. So claim *your* transfiguration. As a baptized person, remember that you are a window through which the world can glimpse the glory of God.