

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Last Epiphany, Year A, February 23, 2020
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Our Transfiguration"
Matthew 17:1-9

Transfigure us, O Lord... Break the chains that bind us; speak your healing word, and where you lead we'll follow. Transfigure us, O Lord.
[Song, "Transfigure us, O Lord"]

what we heard described in our gospel reading today about Jesus' Transfiguration—the changing of his face—showed what he would look like in the future; it was a change from his usual, human likeness, to a vision of his full resurrection glory, with his face shining like the sun, and his clothes dazzling white; the way I expect we'll see Jesus when we meet him face to face, one day

when the vision is over and Jesus looks like himself again, he goes down the mountain with his disciples to continue their ministry; and Jesus orders them not to tell anyone what they'd seen until after his resurrection; they probably kept their word; but do you think their faces looked the same when they came down off that mountain, after that experience? they didn't have to say anything about it, the other disciples could see that something amazing had happened to them up there; Peter and James and John had had their own kind of Transfiguration; they'd been changed, and it must have showed

every time we come to church, through hearing scripture and preaching, and through prayer and praise, we meet Jesus, we see Jesus; and that should show, in our faces, in the way we lead our lives, and in the way we conduct our ministries; every Christian, and every Christian community, should be growing to look and to act more and more like Jesus every day: in the way we demonstrate compassion to those around us; in the way we let prayer guide our lives; in the way we give of ourselves; and in the way we trust God; this is the lifelong transformation each Christian is supposed to go through; this is the ongoing transformation each Christian community is supposed to go through; this is our Transfiguration

how does this transfiguration, this transformation, actually come about? a lot

of it comes through worship; recall that Jesus said (John ch 4) that because God is spirit, we must worship in spirit and in truth; a spirit- and truth-filled worship experience comes more from what we bring to worship than from what we seek to get out of worship; what do you bring of yourself to contribute to worship? are you a passive worshipper or an active worshipper? and by active, I don't mean to suggest that you have to volunteer to take on a position of preparing for the worship service or of leading part of it; I appreciate the tremendous amount of work that volunteers do to make sure our worship happens, but there is also much to be done from the pews

think for a minute: do you bring a frame of mind and of heart to be receptive to the ways that God might work upon you, transfigure you, transform you, in worship? and yes, I'm talking about that difficult word, change; and we just prayed that we would be changed in our Collect of the Day; I've heard a lot over the past six months about looking back at how things used to be done here, whether in worship or in other activities, as if all we have to do is go back to something we used to do in order to move forward; it's as if 'the good old days' offer us a recipe for the future

but what does the Bible say about the 'good old days'? almost every time the idea of looking back to the past surfaces, it is quickly refuted; Isaiah (ch 43) reports God's own warning, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing...;" Paul (Philippians ch 3) says that he is "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...;" no, the Bible is not invested in any 'good old days' kind of thinking

as we continue to pray, think, and work through the actions and decisions that are before us as a parish, we have to be very careful not to fall into that kind of 'good old days' thinking; we must be open to the ways that God is inviting us not to consider the things of old, but instead to do a new thing; we must be open to the ways that God is inviting us not to focus on what lies behind, but to strain forward to see what lies ahead

and the big picture, the picture that is much larger than this parish alone, is that the world of today is not the world of yesterday; the churchgoing population is getting older and older; younger people are often not finding what speaks to them in traditional church; Randy Hollerith, former rector of St James' and now the Dean of Washington National Cathedral, was back in

town recently to talk about how the cathedral is looking ahead to the future; he stressed that every church has to find its own ways to be relevant and meaningful for this new world and for the new generations coming along; and many of those younger folks do not have a denominational attachment, or attachment to particular styles of worship, or even to the habit of attending church regularly; if we try to keep up all of our traditions of formal Episcopal worship, we will find that our appeal is to an increasingly smaller and smaller group

you may have heard this quote from the mid-20th century Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple: “The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.” or, I might add, not yet its members; are we willing to open our minds and hearts enough to be welcoming to those who don’t know how to navigate the Episcopal aerobics of sit-stand-kneel, or the Episcopal juggling of bulletin, prayer book, and hymnal? are we willing to open our minds and hearts enough to be welcoming to those who aren’t sure who Jesus is, but know they are looking for something, for someone, or for anything? are we willing to open our minds and hearts enough to be welcoming to rambunctious and noisy children? are we willing to open our minds and hearts enough to be welcoming to folks who don’t look, or dress, or act, or think like us? because the best indicator of a vibrant, spirit- and truth-filled church, and a church that has a future, is the presence of visitors, and seekers, and children, and a wide diversity of people who who all feel comfortable and welcomed

we are almost at the start of Lent; I hope and pray that whatever kind of Lenten discipline you plan to follow this Lenten season, you will allow God to work upon you in a new way; that you will see something new of God; that you will see something new in God’s people around you; because, looking beyond Lent and ahead to Easter, spoiler alert, Easter morning was a totally new thing, and its promise remains for each of us that it can continue to bring about something new that God has in store for each of us, for all of us together; be intentional every Sunday about inviting and welcome visitors, seekers, children, and especially those who seem unfamiliar with our ways

Lent is the perfect time to examine our lives, individually, to see just how far along we are in becoming our true Christian selves, our true Christ-like selves; Lent is the perfect time to examine our lives, collectively, as a parish, to see just how far along we are in becoming a true Christian community, a true

Christ-like community; my prayer is that all of us may continue to undergo our transfigurations, so that others will see more and more of Jesus in us, and through us; we have been changed and we will continue to be changed; we must show that transfiguration in our faces, and in our actions, and in our lives, and in our parish, to the larger community around us