

## Apostles of the Transfigured Christ

Around the world today, millions of Christians will celebrate the Transfiguration of Christ. Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and certainly other churches beyond these will be on the same page this Sunday morning. August 6<sup>th</sup> is a high holy day in these historic traditions, the day that Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to a mountain where he was transfigured before their eyes. 'Metamorphosis' is the word for *transfiguration* in Greek. The three beloved disciples witnessed a complete metamorphosis in the Galilean rabbi they followed. And today millions of disciples celebrate that metamorphosis of majesty and glory in their transfigured Lord. That's what happening in churches around the world this morning.

But here's the truth *outside* the doors of these churches this morning: no one cares that we're celebrating Transfiguration. There's nothing special about August 6<sup>th</sup> to most people in our world today. For most of us, myself included, we lived decades unaware that August 6<sup>th</sup> was a date of any Christian significance until we joined a historic church. So it's quite a leap to expect people *outside* the church to care about what we celebrate today.

So beyond historic Christian churches, today is an *ordinary* day. People return from vacation, maybe venture out for some back-to-school shopping, or enjoy cooler weather and a nice day in the park before the dog days of August become insufferable. This is the world today: people still search for joy, beauty, even transcendence, but most people won't search for those experiences inside the doors of a church.

You might be wondering: did the rector have some crisis experience while he was on vacation? Has he lost faith in our traditions? No, in fact, quite the opposite. The more secular our culture becomes, the more convinced I become that ancient faith will renew the world. But I'm asking new questions of the traditions we practice, such as the feast of Transfiguration. To borrow from Frederick Buechner, where does the *gift* of our Great Tradition intersect with the world's greatest need?

I'll be unpacking that question in worship beyond today, along with other preachers. As we enter the fall, I've been meditating about God's direction for the year ahead. We're pursuing Jesus' Great Commandment in three ways: by **becoming** a mother church, **deepening** spiritual formation for all ages, and **serving** our neighborhood. We began that ministry vision this time last year.

Here's the next stage of that vision, a goal for the coming year. I want Apostles to be a place for empowering prayerful missionaries. Each of us are called to be

missionaries in Knoxville. We cannot bring the light of Christ into the dark places of our cities with our own strength and power. We need the Holy Spirit, which means we need to grow in prayer. Empowering prayerful missionaries. This is where I want us to devote our time, energy, and resources in the coming months. I'll share more about what's ahead in coming weeks, but everything comes down to helping one another grow in prayer, helping each other become faithful missionaries in Knoxville; helping one another to live empowered by the Holy Spirit. So that's how we'll continue pursuing this Great Commandment vision this fall and into 2018.

We need that common purpose because being a Christian in America will get harder, not easier, in years to come. No one knows what's ahead of us. No one has great insight into what evangelism means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but we all know that the rules have changed. You might have gotten someone's attention 15 or 20 years ago if you asked them about the God-shaped hole in their life. Not so much anymore.

But I refuse to believe that the Holy Spirit will not empower us to be his witnesses in this secular age. I believe the Spirit will guide us into all truth because Jesus said he would. And together we can walk boldly into that future empowered by the Holy Spirit, carrying the Bible in one hand and the Book of Common Prayer in the other. Ours is an *ancient* faith, but it's not an *archaic* faith. We worship the Beautiful One and divine Beauty is not subject to fads and fashions.

You know why we need to celebrate the Transfiguration now more than ever? Because our culture does not value *real* beauty. God breathed his Spirit into human beings so that we would become people of spiritual beauty. But our culture rewards only a certain perception of physical beauty. And even then it's heavily Photo-Shopped and filtered and touched-up and all sorts. We consume hundreds of images of an *artificial* beauty. But you and I weren't made for fake, artificial, or virtual beauty. We were made for a spiritual body radiating love and glory. You see, even though the world thinks we're wasting our time on this lovely late summer Sunday morning, the world needs people who encounter the Beautiful One now more than ever.

And that is the great epiphany we witness this morning when Peter, James, and John behold Jesus transfigured. You and I were made to behold divine glory. It's a hunger deep inside us. God breathed his spirit within us, placed eternity in our hearts, so we crave beauty that radiates the love of God. That's what Peter, James, and John saw on that mountain. They witnessed a person consumed—not with himself, not with his own needs—but with God. Jesus is consumed with love for the

Father and the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Holy Spirit pour their whole love into Jesus. When your whole being receives love and gives love perfectly—there you encounter Glory. St Irenaeus said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. And that's what the three disciples witnessed—the Son of Man fully alive with love and glory.

If you listen closely to Peter's second letter, you hear an older man who was transfigured by the transfiguration. He encountered Real Beauty and he, too, was speaking to churches living in a world rejecting this Gospel. Peter fears his churches will *forget* the Gospel of beauty. He was an eyewitness of the transfigured Christ, a vision he'll never forget, a vision that forever changed him. But he insists on reminding the churches about the Gospel of Transfiguration.

2 Peter 1.13: 'I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon.'

Verse 15: 'I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.'

Peter knows his time on this earth nears its end; he will soon behold that same vision he saw on the mountain. But it's not enough for Peter that he had that *personal* experience. Peter is an apostle—the chief apostle, the Rock of the Church. He will remind the Church that Jesus Christ is Glorious. He tells them, "Always remember that this Gospel is Beautiful—eternally beautiful." And remember you are a lamp shining in a dark place. You cannot hoard that light for yourself. You must shine the light of the transfigured Christ in this dark world that's chasing all kinds of artificial beauty. /

You know, if we're going to be faithful missionaries in our age, we must believe that *nothing in this world compares to the Beauty of our Lord*. We live in a world *filled* with beautiful things. Both heaven *and* earth are filled with glory. But many times we're pursuing all kinds of secondhand beauty instead of going directly to see the Beautiful One. We all crave beauty because God placed that hunger inside us. But we search for derivative forms of beauty to feel alive, to get a glimpse of something spectacular. *The saints of God must become convinced in this secular age that nothing in this world compares to the Beauty of our Lord*.

You know what happens when you search for good, rich, and beautiful experiences apart from God? You become bored. When you pursue good things to substitute your longing for God, eventually you become bored. You're looking for some kind of entertainment, travel, or an experience to help you feel alive. You

need that fix. But once you've tried everything and you've run out of new things, you get bored.

Don't you find it fascinating that *boredom* defines much of our age right now? It's becoming common for younger generations, but it applies to people of all ages. Think about that for a moment. We live in an on-demand age of smartphones, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We're more connected than we've ever been. We have access to more entertainment than ever before. When I was a kid, I used to be wowed by a jukebox. I was amazed at all the titles in Blockbuster movies. And now it's all on a device I can put in my pocket. And we're *bored* with all this stuff.

You know why? These things can't lead us to real beauty. You and I were made for real beauty. The world needs to meet people who regularly encounter the Beautiful One.

The great British historian, Arnold Toynbee, said there are four possibilities for a declining civilization, and I think we're on safe grounds to say we live in a time of moral decline. Toynbee says a culture may choose:

- 1) Archaism: yearning for a past Golden Age
- 2) Futurism: fantasy of a new age unrelated to what now exists, obtained by violence
- 3) Escapism: contemplation, studying/discussing the problem without doing anything
- 4) Transfiguration: bringing the total situation and ourselves as participants into a larger context which gives it a new meaning

I think you can see the best option. We need to be transfigured by an encounter with the transfigured Christ. That's the best gift you can offer this city, a city in which recent statistics say that 81% of Knoxvillians aren't in church this morning. Our world doesn't need archaism or futurism, either hearkening for a past Golden Age or living in some dreamworld. Neither does the world need endless words from us. Our city needs people who will say 'yes' when Jesus invites them up the mountain *and* who follow him down the mountain to serve the hurting, the tired, and yes, the bored.

I think it's one of the most overlooked, yet most important, parts of the Transfiguration story—these two sides of the mountain. Jesus *invited* them up the mountain and they had a decision to make. They didn't know they were going to witness his transfiguration. When they saw his glory, it's obvious they didn't want to

leave. But then Jesus led them down the mountain, entering daily life of ordinary towns and villages. They had a decision to make too.

You know, you don't have to be in the Smoky Mountains or some beautiful location to encounter Christ. You simply have to accept his invitation. Any place you experience the glory of the Lord becomes an elevated place. I know that many days in prayer are mundane and a test of discipline. That's the hard thing about prayer. But on those days he reveals his Beauty, it makes all the other days worth it. You truly understand Peter's commitment to remember the transfiguration, not just for your own heart, but because you're his apostle. Encountering the Beautiful One changes everything.

We long for the mountain encounter with Christ and it happens so rarely. C.S. Lewis captured that longing in *Prince Caspian*. Reminder: no spoilers, Madeleine and I are moving slowly through these stories.

When the Pevensie children journey through Narnia to find Prince Caspian, Lucy thinks she sees Aslan across the gorge. Her siblings and their Dear Little Friend, Trumpkin, can't believe that's possible. But later in the journey Lucy wakes up one morning before her sister, Susan, and her two brothers, Peter and Edmund, awake. *While they sleep*, Lucy wanders amidst walking trees—yes, walking trees!—only to find Aslan, the Christ-figure of Narnia. Lucy is thrilled with her reunion with Aslan, but she doesn't know what to do about her sister and brothers a) who are sleeping and b) who thought she was crazy when she saw Aslan across the gorge.

I think it's no accident that Lewis tells us Lucy is awake and the people she loves dearly—her siblings—are asleep. Even still, Aslan leads Lucy to face the responsibility she has for her siblings. "If you go back to the others now, and wake them up," Aslan says, "and tell them you have seen me again; and that you must all get up at once and follow me—what will happen? There is only one way of finding out."

"Do you mean that is what you want me to do?" gasped Lucy.

"Yes, little one" said Aslan.

"Will the others see you too?" asked Lucy.

"Certainly not at first," said Aslan. "Later on, it depends."

"But they won't believe me!" said Lucy.

"It doesn't matter," said Aslan.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Lucy. “And I was so pleased at finding you again. And I thought you’d let me stay. And I thought you’d come roaring and frighten all the enemies away—like last time. And now everything is going to be horrid.”

“It is hard for you little one,” said Aslan. “But things never happen the same way twice. It has been hard for us all in Narnia before now.”

Lucy buried her head in his mane to hide from his face. But there must have been magic in his mane. She could feel lion-strength going into her. Quite suddenly she sat up.

“I’m sorry, Aslan,” she said. “I’m ready now.”

“Now you are a lioness,” said Aslan. “And now all Narnia will be renewed. But come. We have no time to lose.”<sup>1</sup>

So on August 6<sup>th</sup>, a high holy day for disciples of Jesus and an ordinary Sunday for friends outside the church, I hope we might lean into Christ and his glory and take courage in our time. Jesus wants to renew this good world. I want to take Peter seriously when he writes that this Gospel of Transfiguration is ‘a lamp shining in a dark place.’ I truly believe the Transfiguration helps us become better evangelists in this secular age.

Dostoyevsky spoke Gospel words when he wrote ‘beauty will save the world.’ Let’s believe that statement in our time: Beauty can save our secular age; Beauty can save post-Christian America. Beauty can save our city. But not just any kind of Beauty—only divine Beauty revealed in Jesus Christ can save us. The great Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said that in his transfiguration, Jesus discloses “another world [and] He reveals that no part of created things and no moment of created time lies outside the power of the Spirit, who is Lord, to change from glory into glory.”<sup>2</sup> So let us be changed by a vision of Glory this morning and let us go forth from *this sacred place* as apostles of the Transfiguration to a world hungry for real, eternal Beauty. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 142-143.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 147.