



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, MARCH 3, 2019

EXODUS 34:20-35; PSALM 99:1-2, 6-9; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-4:2; LUKE 9:28-43A

HOW THINGS REALLY ARE

Luke 9:28-43a *[Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.]*

Once upon a time – in ancient days before the internet, before you could Google up images of anything and anybody, when we listened to music on cassette tapes – I went to see a singer whose music I had just discovered and loved who was playing at The Bottom Line in New York City. It was this really great music venue, all black and dark inside, kind of wider than it was deep, with chairs and little tables on a raked floor. We ordered a beer and some greasy snack, and I was so excited! When David Wilcox

sauntered out onto the thrust stage in his jeans and t-shirt and sat on a beat-up stool with his guitar, I was a little underwhelmed; he was a pretty nondescript guy. But with every song he played, he got more and more “descript!” By the time we were on our feet at the end of that concert, he looked like Captain America to me!

I’ve gone to see him play probably a dozen times since, over these decades, and even aging, he still has it. Because I know who’s in there and he *shines*.

When we act on what is truest in ourselves, it lights us up and changes things. And we see that shine in people when they are doing what they love, because you just can't miss it! There's no missing the authenticity and joy he feels when a David Wilcox tells stories and sings his songs. When somebody shines, it's so bright! Once you see it, they never look the same again – you know their true light.

I know you have experienced that. Sometimes someone you think you know surprises you and you suddenly see them truly, right? There's a new, brighter light – and you can't help but respond to it. The light in me responds to the light in you, and that is a special kind of joy.

But life isn't one shining moment after another. Great hardship, great suffering is part of life. We carry so many things – some that everyone can see, some that are private burdens. Where's that dazzle *then*?

Well, it's pointed to in today's Gospel of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes three of his closest disciples up on the mountain and they see him SHINE, resplendent in his true glory. He is alight right beside the two towering figures of the Jewish people: Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, and Moses, the giver of the law. And then Elijah and Moses recede and Jesus remains – because he is the fulfillment of the prophecies of old and he is the culmination of the law. The Gospel of

John (1:17) says, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” This Transfiguration is glorious, and Peter and James and John witness it.

But I point out here: these disciples had *already* seen Jesus shine. Up to this point in the Gospel of Luke, they have heard his teaching and have seen him heal lepers and a paralytic and a withered hand and the hemorrhaging woman, and cast out demons and feed the 5,000 with the five loaves and two fishes, and calm the storm on the Sea of Galilee. And if that isn't bright enough, they saw him raise the widow's son from the dead! Truly, the disciples have already seen Jesus shining; that's why they're following him!

But now he takes them up the mountain – and the vision **is** glorious. It's **so** glorious, we tend to skip over a critical passage in this Luke version of the Transfiguration – verse 31: “They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of the Transfiguration, but Luke is the only one that names what Moses and Elijah and Jesus were talking about. The King James translation says they “spake of his *decease* which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.” A little more graphic. Moses and Elijah and Jesus were talking about his “exodus” in the

Greek – literally his going out – his *death*. They were talking about Jesus being on his way to his crucifixion on this earthly path to Jerusalem. Not so very glorious!

...Stop for a minute, and imagine what that conversation about Jesus' departure among these three luminaries was like? Well, how glorious could it have *felt* to Jesus in these days of journey toward Jerusalem – knowing he was going to be deserted, degraded, tortured? What did he need to face those days?

Were Moses and Elijah offering him encouragement and strength for the hardest part of the journey? And did being there give encouragement to the disciples, too, who some eight days ago had heard this Jesus, whose shine they have been eagerly following, say he must suffer and be killed? And then, even greater than Moses and Elijah, the voice from heaven, rounding back, recalling the words from Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son" – and added emphasis: "Listen to him!"

Encouragement upon encouragement. Why? Because things were about to get awful! I think about that. Even at this moment of his great glory shining, at this Transfiguration on the mountain top, Jesus was carrying a frightening knowledge, a terrible suffering – but the great figures of Jesus' Jewish faith, and God himself, were reminding him, and

reminding his disciples, that God was with him and he was beloved.

That's powerfully significant, that the glory and the suffering are both there on the mountaintop – that when Jesus' Divine nature was dazzlingly visible to his disciples, his human suffering was the subject of the conversation! It is a poignant affirmation about life, and something absolutely essential to living with sorrow: that joy and hardship walk side by side – glory and suffering.

And WE need to know that in the midst of darkness, so we don't forget the hope and promise of being a follower of Jesus. In the midst of what feels like ever worsening, exclusionary and divisive times in our nation, we need to remember that we are ALL beloved of God, even people we disagree with. In the midst of our confusion about policy, we need to remember that our clear call as Christians is to relentlessly lift up the oppressed, especially in the face of set-backs and exclusion. And in the midst of feeling overwhelmed by that call, and the vociferous forces of fear at work against it, we need to remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

When we put our faith there, we can still see the true dazzling light shine, and follow it – even in the darkest times. The whole of creation is gathered up and transfigured in

Jesus Christ. It looked like heaven, but they also talk of real suffering.

I know I hold onto that in my life. We each will carry heavy griefs in this life, sorrows and suffering that can make our world feel very, very dark. That is part of the human journey. But that's precisely where the Transfiguration gives me hope – and I hope it gives you hope, too: that in the midst of the reality of great suffering, there was the dazzling light of the Divine. Joy does walk beside grief. I hear in my head John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

We can find this in our own lives – that even in the midst of the sorrows we carry, if we pry open our hearts to joy, joy **will** creep in. Sometimes we can be afraid of that, afraid that letting joy shine into us means we are forgetting. But when it's about love, we never forget. Joy doesn't send our grief away, but it longs to be its bright companion.

The poet Malcolm Guite wrote about the Transfiguration¹:

*The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.*

How things really are. That's what the Transfiguration shows us in Jesus. The love of God is dazzling. And that love, that light of Christ, in the face of everything, is inextinguishable. We are a resurrection people.

You have seen it in yourself, and you have seen it in each other. Once we get that glimpse of how things really are, we, too are transfigured.

¹Guite, Malcolm. “A Sonnet for the Feast of the Transfiguration.” Malcolm Guite.

<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/a-sonnet-for-the-feast-of-the-transfiguration/>

(accessed March 1, 2019).



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL