

**A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie**  
**The Last Sunday After the Epiphany**  
**February 14, 2021**

2 Kings 2:1-12  
Psalm 50:1-6  
2 Corinthians 4:3-6  
Mark 9:2-9

Good morning, Christ Church friends. It is a joy to be with you again! Today is February 14, and we all know it as Valentine's Day—a day to “keep them handy, flowers and candy”, as a 1960's song proclaims. But in the Episcopal Church calendar, February 14 is not Valentine's Day. It is my solemn duty to tell you that February 14 is the Feast of Cyril and Methodius. These two were brothers from the city of Thessalonika, who in the 9<sup>th</sup> century became monks and then missionaries to the southern Slavic peoples. They helped to develop Slavic literary culture by introducing written language; the followers of Cyril are thought to have invented the Cyrillic alphabet. I just thought you should know, in case you didn't know it already. Besides, it might not be much fun for some to observe Valentine's Day during the ongoing pandemic.

Be that as it may, this is also the last Sunday after the Epiphany—the last Sunday of this season of light, which the late John Westerhof called a season all about childhood dreams and new possibilities. We've followed Jesus from his birth and manifestation to the wise men; to his baptism in the River Jordan; to his calling his disciples; to the exciting beginnings of a ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and exorcising demons in the region of Galilee. Despite growing envy and hostility from the religious authorities, Jesus and his disciples have gone from success to success, in what the 19<sup>th</sup> century French author Ernst Renan called “the Galilean springtime.”

But now that springtime is ending. Six days prior to this morning's story, which we hear each year on the last Sunday of this season, Jesus has announced to his disciples that they are to go to Jerusalem, where he will be rejected by the chief priests and elders and arrested, tried, and then crucified, and thence will rise from the dead. The disciples are totally shocked and bewildered—and, to my mind, perhaps more so in the Gospel of Mark, where they are customarily portrayed as being obtuse and clueless as to what is going on with Jesus. Hence, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him to a place apart up a mountain, and there they have the mysterious and frightening vision that is the subject of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus, flanked by Moses and Elijah, is transfigured before them.

I wonder how the story of the transfiguration resonates with each of you, and how it might speak to us in our own lives. I must confess that for many years I found the story unsettling and off-putting, until one day when I reported that sentiment to my spiritual director, she then smiled and said gently, “Oh, I love the story—to me it's all about the disciples coming to see Jesus for whom he really was, and is.” That helped me to reconfigure the story in my own religious imagination, and to ask the question, “How is it that we can see the light of Christ in the ordinary instances of our lives—when we're living in what the poet Wallace Stevens called “the malady of

the quotidian?” As St. Paul says in our second lesson today, “the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Armed with that question, I had the experience of visiting the mount of transfiguration some 14 years ago, when I was on sabbatical leave and attending a study course at St. George’s College in Jerusalem. We toured around the old city and saw the sites of Jesus’ ministry, and we also ventured into the Galilee—to Nazareth, Cana, the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, the Dead Sea, Caesarea Philippi—and, 11 miles from the Sea of Galilee, Mount Tabor, which is the Mount of Transfiguration. It rises alone some 1900 feet above the surrounding countryside, in the valley of Jezreel. It was a warm, sunny, breezy, pleasant day in June as we rode in a tour bus up the winding road toward the summit.

There is an old Quaker soul within me—I was a member of the Society of Friends for almost ten years in my life and as we rode along, I thought again about simplicity and how to see the light of Christ in the ordinary, and said to myself, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if when we got to the top of the mountain, there would be nothing there, except for the local vegetation and the panoramic view of the surrounding countryside? If only we could see the place as Jesus, Peter, James and John saw it!”

Of course, that was not the case. When you arrive at the top, you find a Franciscan monastery, one of two monasteries on the mountain, and a large magnificent church built by the Franciscans in 1924—replacing a Crusader church that had been there centuries before, and a Byzantine church that had been there centuries before the Crusaders. It is the Church of the Transfiguration, and high above the altar in the main worship area is a mosaic depicting the transfigured Christ, which shines radiantly when the sunlight falls upon it in the afternoon. There are also two chapels, one dedicated to Moses, and one to Elijah—as Peter said, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah...” We human beings have a penchant for memorializing occasions, and so it is with the Transfiguration.

But I want us to return to the idea of how we see the transfigured light of Christ in everyday occurrences. I must report that I have been bathed in this light in surprising ways—in the supermarket; in the hospital while visiting someone; on walks along woodland paths; in music concerts; while watching the snow fall on winter days. Suddenly you know in certain circumstances that Jesus Christ is present, hitherto in disguise, and the transcendent light is there.

And this light can come to all of us, if we open our senses and expand the limits of our spiritual imaginations. Two years ago I re-read Gilead, a wonderful short novel by Marilynne Robinson. It spoke to me after I had retired from full-time parish ministry. It is about an aging Protestant minister in rural Iowa, who knows that he will die soon from coronary disease. He married a young woman later in life, and they have a seven-year old son, to whom he is writing a long letter of personal reflections, which he hopes the son will read someday when the minister has departed this life, and the son is older. The minister refers frequently to all of his saved sermons from decades of ministry, which are packed in boxes and stored in the attic of his home. He figures that he has more pages of writing collected there than St. Augustine had in his lifetime.

Yet he will not revisit any of them, and he has told his wife to burn them after his death. Toward the very end of the book he simply says:

*It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes in this poor gray ember of creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know that it had anything to do with fire, or light...But the Lord is more constant and extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who would have the courage to see it?*

I believe that the light of Christ not only can come to us in ordinary, everyday moments, but also in the dark, troubling moments of our lives—times in which we know that things are not the way we wish they could be. In the gospel text this morning we are told that Jesus, Peter, James and John went up on the mountain to a place apart “six days later”-- What has just preceded this passage is Jesus' revelation of his coming passion, after which he says, “If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me.”

The Galilean springtime has ended—for Jesus, and for us. In three days we come to Ash Wednesday—our day of atonement. We are called to cast away our characteristic denial and know again in a very real way that we are mortal; and we have sinned, both individually, and corporately. Ours is a broken world, and ours is often a not very loving species. And yet, we carry within us this moment, and this memory, of the light of the transfigured Christ.

My favorite story of the knowledge of this transfigured light in the dark time of the world, comes from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his wonderful book of devotional theology called God Has a Dream. During some of the worst days of apartheid, Archbishop Tutu struggled against all the objective facts of failure with the hope that God was going to bring about a new beginning in the country, because God is a God of justice, who cares about right and wrong. “Sometimes you had to whistle in the dark to keep your hopes up,” he writes, and “sometimes you wanted to whisper in God's ear: ‘God, we know that You are in charge, but can't you make it a little more obvious?’”

Tutu tells us that God did make it more obvious to him one August 6, which is the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Church's calendar. He was meeting with some colleagues at a theological college to prepare for a meeting with the prime minister to discuss the many controversies that had erupted. The college was closed because of the government's racist policies. Listen to Archbishop Tutu's beautiful words:

*During our discussions I went into the priory garden for some quiet. There was a huge Calvary—a large wooden cross without corpus, but with protruding nails and a crown of thorns. It was a stark symbol of the Christian faith. It was winter; the grass was pale and dry and nobody believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again. It would be transfigured.*

*As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration—of God's transformation—in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry*

*streams gurgle with the swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection.*

*The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is “untransfigurable”. That the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will be not just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory.*

Our Christian history, Desmond Tutu reminds us, is filled with stories of transfiguration, beginning with the most spectacular illustration of this principle—the Cross itself. “As I sat in the priory garden”, he writes, “I thought of our desperate political situation in the light of this principle of transfiguration and from that moment on, it has helped me to see with new eyes.”

The season of light and childhood dreams is ending; Ash Wednesday and Lent are on their way. And if you're like me, perhaps you feel that Lent has really not ended since the last time it was around— because, if you recall, that was precisely when Covid-19 assumed pandemic proportions. And we continue to live in a world that is one of desperate uncertainty and anxiety for so many. Nevertheless, as Archbishop Tutu said, no one and no situation is untransfigurable. We carry in our tradition the collective memory of Jesus transfigured before his disciples, and let that memory nurture and sustain us.

I'm reminded that almost five years ago, one of my parishioners, a dear, marvelous 13 year-old boy who was a devotee of the “Star Wars” movies, died from osteosarcoma—bone cancer. He bravely suffered through a long, difficult, and painful journey with an illness for which there is no lasting effective treatment. His mother, who is not employed in the medical professions, has nevertheless made a very significant endeavor to do ongoing scientific research in genomics and has made some extremely valuable contributions to the work of those who are on the front lines of the fight against this disease. She frequently quotes her son, who in the course of his suffering spoke with incredible spiritual awareness, saying more than once, “Look for the light, Mama...always look for the light.”

I invite each of us, in our continuing journeys, to look for the light. Amen.