

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, March 3, 2019

*Exodus 34:29-35 | Psalm 99*  
*2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 | Luke 9:28-43a*

As I was writing this sermon, two children's stories from my youth came into my mind. The first is the story of the "Emperors New Clothes". I am sure you all know it. In it a very powerful, very vain, but not very clever Emperor with a great love of fine clothes is persuaded by two con men that they are the best tailors in all the land and that they make the very finest, most sophisticated attire in the world. So fine, in fact, that only those with the most superior taste can appreciate it.

It's a little like those designers today that have persuaded otherwise quite intelligent people that buying jeans with the knees ripped and torn, or wearing their trousers so far down their body that parts of them are much more visible than is at all necessary, are actually the most sophisticated and trendy threads that you can imagine!

Anyway, back to the story. The con men persuade the Emperor that these ultimate robes are in fact invisible to all but the most sophisticated and, being terrified of not appearing discerning and cool, he famously processes through the city stark naked. Nobody dares say anything until a young child calls out that he is 'in the altogether'. The illusion is broken and the crowd joins in the jeering.

The other story is that of the "Ugly Duckling" who, as I am sure you recall, is distained and rejected by all the ducks because he is small and scruffy and different – a most unsuccessful duck in fact. In the end of course, the reason becomes clear – he isn't a duck at all, and he emerges, in time, as a beautiful, majestic swan. It is the reverse of the process we see with most of our politicians, many of whom start out looking like majestic swans, but who are revealed, in time, to be very ugly ducklings indeed!

Today we stand at the doorway to Lent. This Wednesday we will have the opportunity to come here, and make a start to a season that has been called the 'Holy Spring.' Over the coming 40 days we will watch the winter fade and feel the sun's warmth return. We will try to find ways to tend to the garden of our souls, and to open our lives to God's presence. On Ash Wednesday we start with the dark ash of our mortality. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Yet this is not just a reminder that our time here on this earth is temporary. It is also a reminder that life is most wonderfully precious, a gift we never deserved or even asked for. See how high this dust has been allowed to grow in us! How amazing that is!

The Transfiguration is a most appropriate Gospel for us today, because it reminds us of the truth behind the veil. The truth we can only see some of the time; that we can only see when we are really awake and really looking.

The Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary, Ian Markham, pointed me to this wonderful sonnet about the Transfiguration by the priest and poet Ayodeji Malcolm Guite:

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',  
On that one mountain where all moments meet,

The daily veil that covers the sublime  
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.  
There were no angels full of eyes and wings  
Just living glory full of truth and grace.  
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.

On mountaintops we can see a very long way. We can see what we can't see down in the jungle of day-to-day life. Down here we sweat and work and cut our way through many obstacles. Here the vision of where we are heading can seem almost like an impossible dream at times. Just getting by, bringing up children, working, dealing with imperfect relationships, meeting a thousand demands in a thousand different ways. And when we are not meeting those demands we are mostly just seeking distraction and anesthetic in order to rest our over-worked hearts and minds. The veil is everywhere draped like a thick fog over everything that is more than a few feet from our eyes.

What lifts that veil? What makes us see the nakedness of the Emperor and the beauty of the Swan in the ugly duckling?

First there is sorrow. The composer Elgar once said of a young singer, who was technically perfect in every way, but quite without any feeling and expression, "She will be great when something breaks her heart." Often sorrow can awaken us. We may be hurt and broken, but, in that moment, through the tears, we can suddenly see the glory.

Then there is love. Somewhere the poet Robert Browning tells of two people who fall in love. She looked at him; he looked at her, he says "and suddenly life awoke." When we experience real love, then our eyes can be opened, the fog of the veil is lifted, and we are awakened to horizons we never dreamed were there.

There is also real need. For long enough we may live the routine of life half asleep; then all of a sudden there comes some completely insoluble problem, some quite unanswerable question, something we feel is quite beyond our strength. In that day there is nothing left to do but look to the heavens and cry out. That sense of desperate need can awaken us to God. Challenge and failure can lift the veil as well as love and sorrow.

The account of the disciples' experience on Mount Tabor read from the perspective of the prosaic day-to-day world in which we work and move and live our lives, can seem like nothing more than the memory of a bizarre dream or fantasy. Yet, we are told, the disciples were awake. Indeed had they slept they would have missed it. More, they were actually awakened in a more profound way than they had ever been.

Our experiences of heartbreak, love, and failure; our experiences of the veil of ordinary sight being lifted are not so very far away from this. Our transfigurations are the moments we recognize as our moments of deeper and truer insight.

So as we consider this coming Lent, we are both setting off to climb the mountain but also looking for the lifting of the veil here and now. Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain after the extraordinary insight, and they are confronted with the brokenness of the world. Waiting for them is the Epileptic, thrashing on the ground and foaming at the mouth. The disciples that are trying to deal with the situation are powerless. Away from the beatific vision, our world is dark and troubled and confused. This is where we live most of the time, a place where truth is compromised by self-interest, the desire for power, and the battle between the many tribes to which we all belong.

Yet, in Lent, in the Holy Spring that is coming, we have the opportunity to see within that, the Christ who walks in the mire of human sin and weaves his light and hope and love through it all.

As the poem said:

“Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar  
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.”

This Lent, let us try to set aside time and space to reflect on those aspects of our lives that lift the veil and allow us to see. When we pray, may we let our experiences of heartbreak, and love, and deep need cut through the fog of life and open our eyes to the Christ who comes to walk in the garden of our souls. Make time to go to the Tuesday Lent Program, or to come the Lent Quiet Day or to a quiet early morning Eucharist a couple of times a week. Let us make time to draw close to him so that he may help us clear our overgrown hearts, break new ground, plant new seed, and lift the veil that we may see him for who he is, and ourselves for who we are. Yes, foolish, and naked, in the face of his truth, like the Emperor, but also the dearly beloved swans-to-be of his kingdom.