

Sermon by Katherine Chatelaine-Samsen
The Transfiguration of our Lord
Matthew 17:1 – 9
February 26, 2017

Last Saturday, a small group from this congregation met for a workshop on *Visio Divina*, or “holy seeing,” a contemplative prayer practice that uses images like art, photography, or sculpture to center ourselves on God. In the lead-up to engaging in *Visio Divina* itself, we spent some time talking about beauty and what we all found to be beautiful. Everyone had something to say – rainbows that caught us by surprise, butterflies in flight, glaciers flowing down the sides of mountains, and various kinds of artwork were a few images of beauty that were shared. I’m sure everyone here today can contribute something to the list! And beauty is something that we all enjoy, at some level. It pulls us out of the mundane elements of life, offers us a vision of something beyond ourselves, and might even be an inspiration. Many artists have been so inspired by a beautiful landscape, person, or vision that they have tried to capture it in some way using paint, clay, marble, wood, or some other medium. Composers, inspired by beautiful sounds, often compose grand symphonies or simple songs to build upon the beauty they have experienced. Beauty has an element of transcendence and inspiration that can be incredibly powerful.

The Transfiguration, which we hear about in today’s Gospel from Matthew, is a moment of great beauty. It occurs shortly after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God and Jesus’ prediction of his own death, and just before Jesus heals a boy with a demon that the disciples cannot heal. In our church year, it comes at the end of the season of Epiphany and just before the season of Lent. The story is found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and it’s among the more confusing and fantastical stories the gospel writers tell about Jesus – he glowed? And Moses and Elijah hung out with him – wait, weren’t they dead? Even the characters in the story can’t get their heads around what’s going on. Peter bumbles around, offering to make shelters for Jesus and his guests before God comes along in a cloud and cuts him off. The whole experience is bewildering and kind of terrifying.

But it’s also beautiful. Imagine seeing someone shining as bright as the sun – it would be beautiful, right? Peter reflects on this experience in his second letter, which we read today, saying that he was an “eyewitness of Christ’s majesty.” The church fathers spoke of the glory and beauty present in the moment of the Transfiguration. Countless artists have attempted to capture what this experience could have looked like – Bellini, Raphael, Theophanes the Greek, Father John Giuliani, Rembrandt, and more. The transfiguration possesses a beauty that pulls a person in and serves as an inspiration for more beauty.

But the transfiguration is more than a pretty sunset or a painting you can hang on your wall at home. The beauty in the transfiguration might inspire more beauty, but there’s a purpose to it. It’s a beauty that transforms our ordinary lives and the world around us. It’s God’s beauty, revealed on that mountaintop of the transfiguration, God’s beauty that is the source and inspiration for transformation.

When Jesus was transfigured, the glory of God was revealed. God's indescribable beauty was uncovered, like a veil had dropped. What had been hidden was made plain to Peter, James, and John for just a flash of a moment. It was beautiful, and terrible, and awesome all at the same time. But they couldn't stay up there forever – they had to leave the mountaintop to return to the world below them, a world that was full of pain, anguish, suffering, and ugliness. What a downer! I wonder how they felt as they left that mountain – full of regret? Anger and resentment? Hope?

Let's go back to what I said about God's beauty being the source and inspiration for transformation. I'm going to enlist the help of my favorite theologian, John DeGruchy, to explain what I mean. DeGruchy lives and teaches in South Africa and writes about the transformative power of beauty, specifically in relation to the dismantling of apartheid. For him, the transfiguration is not a mystical moment of revelation that is separate from the world. Instead, it's a moment that challenges our concept of beauty because it prefigures another time when God's great, terrible beauty is revealed – that is, at the crucifixion. The revelation of God's beauty at the transfiguration is, in his words, "a sobering prelude to engaging the power of evil." The disciples didn't stay on top of the mountain with the transfigured Jesus forever: after this event, they descended into the valley where they were confronted with the real ugliness and pain of the world. They experienced God's beauty on the mountaintop and later again in the midst of the ugliness and pain of the cross. God's beauty is in the midst of these dark places and can shine a light of hope that can transform even the ugliest of realities.

DeGruchy has a name for this sort of seeing: transfiguration spirituality. In his words, transfiguration spirituality, "the spirituality of seeing the splendor of God even in the midst of ugliness and pain, is a transformative spirituality and therefore one which can be understood in the light of the gift of the Spirit." Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are given the eyes to see God's beauty and redemption at work in the world. And through the Holy Spirit, we are emboldened and equipped to go forth off the mountaintop to fully engage with a broken world to point to the places where God's beauty is revealed.

Peter, James, John, and the other disciples did this. They left their mountaintop experience with Jesus and uncovered places where the beauty of God was transforming the world, whether it was in Rome, Corinth, Damascus, or any one of a number of places that needed to see God's beauty in their midst. And the vision of this beauty took hold and spread to all corners of the earth to places where we still need to see God's beauty transforming the real ugliness of the world into places that reflect God's beauty.

To return to DeGruchy, he sees the Church as a key player in this, specifically in its use of art. So long as the art points to the glory of God rather than to the glory of the church building, he believes it can help with the spiritual process of transformation in the dark places of our communities. These works of art can point to God's beauty and serve as an inspiration for our own participation in the work of transformation.

I'll give you a local example of this. Take a walk down Columbia Road NW, between 16th and 18th Streets. It's a typical city block, full of restaurants, apartment buildings, liquor

stores, and small markets. There's trash on the sidewalk, perhaps a few unhoused people standing around. It's not particularly beautiful. But take a closer look – outside a building called the Festival Center, there's a sculpture of a blind man who has regained his sight. A little further down, in front of a hospice called Christ House, there's an oxidized metal relief of about a dozen people of all abilities. These pieces of art were commissioned by a network of churches and nonprofits called the Church of the Saviour, which has been instrumental in transforming the spirit of this block. From providing job training to a lay seminary to affordable housing to hospice for the homeless, this community has seen God's beauty and transformed the real ugliness and pain of a city block into places of hope and possibility for those who are often forgotten. The artwork serves as a signpost for God's transformative beauty at work in the midst of this neighborhood and can inspire those with the eyes to see God's beauty in even the ugliest of places.

This Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a season when we descend into a valley that culminates in the painful and ugly reality of the cross. Yet God transforms even that moment into one of great and transformative beauty. May we carry the hope of this beautiful transformation with us throughout this season, and as we leave this space to reflect God's beauty in the world around us.

Thanks be to God, AMEN.