

Sermon: Epiphany People  
Text: Matthew 17:1-9  
Date: February 23, 2020  
Context: WWPC  
Transfiguration Sunday  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*And he was transfigured before them,  
and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

Matthew 17:2

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration. Or perhaps I should say we observe the Transfiguration, because this is a story about a decidedly visual event, a unique moment in Jesus' life when he appears to be turned into light itself.

Admittedly, reading about it is a poor substitute for being there, on that famous mountain top, but I hope you were perhaps able to visualize this amazing light show in your mind's eye, at least to some extent.

This occasion, this moment in Jesus' life, this transfiguration, marks the end of the season of Epiphany. The season starts on Christmas day and extends right through to this Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday -- an entire season devoted to celebrating the idea that in Jesus, the very presence of God is revealed to the world, in Jesus, the very light of God is made manifest in the world.

The liturgically minded among us will know that after the last Sunday in Epiphany comes Ash Wednesday, and after that comes Lent, which means that Easter is now on the distant horizon. In years past I have preached sermons centered around the idea of being "Easter people".

The idea is that in a world full of so much death, it is incumbent upon us as followers of Christ not just to believe in the resurrection in some way but to practice it.

When towers fall, we raise them up again.

When Good Friday descends upon our world, when hope itself seems to die, we take a day to regain our composure, then we set about creating hope where there is no hope.

When loved ones succumb, suddenly and without warning, to a devastating stroke, we do what we must to make sure they live on in our hearts, our minds, our midst.

I still believe, and I will always believe, in the importance of being Easter people.

But lately I've come to wonder if we might also be called to be Epiphany people.

When a thick cloud descends and darkness falls, we get up, as Jesus instructed the disciples to do, and head his command to not be afraid.

When the lights go out in our families or our communities or our country, we find a way to shine in the darkness.

This is not as outlandish a suggestion as it perhaps sounds. Just a few weeks ago we focused on a passage from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus himself declares "You are the light of the world."

Taken as a whole, and as we noted on that Sunday, the crowd to whom makes that extraordinary declaration is not particularly distinguished. It is not comprised of world-class leaders, or brilliant scientists, or world-renowned doctors.

He says it to a group not so different in some way from those of us gathered here today, a broad spectrum of good-hearted people, collectively trying to do our best as a community of faith.

Our clothes may not be dazzling white and our faces may never shine like the beam from a lighthouse, but still, Jesus declares to us, too, that we are the light of the world.

The question then follows: when people look at us do they see Epiphany people? Do they see God somehow made manifest? Do they get a glimpse of the Divine presence, of the light of God?

I do not mean this in a self-aggrandizing sense, as though any given church goer is in a different class of people, a more important class, than the kind-hearted, non-church going man who helps us find the right drill bit at Ace Hardware, or the conscientious atheist who works ten hour days, registering voters for the upcoming election.

Because of course we're not more important than those kind-hearted conscientious folks, not more important than any of God's precious children.

Without trying to sound dismissive or judge-y, I also do not mean this in a kind of New Age sense. I'm not referring to a sort of universal divinity inherent in us all.

I mean it in the Biblical sense. Is the God of scripture -- the God of Moses and Elijah, the God of the Law and the prophets -- is this God made manifest in us? Do our lives radiate the light and love of the God revealed in Jesus?

I ask this because I can't remember a time in my life when the world needs this love and this light more than it does right now.

On Wednesday I had a one-on-one meeting scheduled first thing in the morning. I was meant to meet this person for a muffin at a nearby coffee house. I arrived early so, in the middle of a busy week, I pulled out my computer in the hope of maybe dashing off a few quick emails before my meeting started.

This lasted about two minutes because just as I was getting started, two gentlemen seated nearby started to talk about immigration. The first minute went well enough but about a minute after that, they were close to shouting at each other.

"No country on earth lets people just come across its border without documentation," insisted one.

"No country on earth rips children from their parents and puts them in cages," replied the other.

"But they are all here illegally," bellowed the first.

“They’re here because they’re desperate,” cried the other.

With that I closed my computer, met my person at the door, and we found another place to meet.

Let me be clear: I am not neutral in the immigration debate. I have a view and an opinion and -- this will surprise you -- I hold that view and that opinion quite strongly.

And the truth is, I myself have engaged in exchanges that are perhaps not entirely different from that one.

But listening in on that disagreement from the outside, I became acutely aware that God is not made manifest by arguing.

Shouting does not reveal the light of God, not even if, perhaps especially not if, you shout a little louder. This strategy does not work when you’re trying to get your Italian-speaking waiter to understand that you want pepperoni, not prosciutto, on your pizza.

And it certainly doesn’t work when you’re trying to convince your interlocutor that you’re right and they’re wrong.

You don’t persuade anyone by yelling, or win them over to the side of love through sheer rhetorical dominance.

Here is a truth that has been lost in our time: it is possible not to be neutral and to still be gracious.

It is possible to feel a certain passion about any given issue and not be a lout.

Yes, I will work to make my country more welcoming to refugees and asylum seekers. I myself will perhaps work to register voters with the goal of electing officials who share my view that people who are running for their lives do not deserve to be arrested when they arrive at our border asking for help.

But that's trying to usher in God's realm as I understand at least, at the macro-level. More and more, I want that realm, that presence, that manifestation, to break out in coffee houses and hardware stores.

I want to be an Epiphany person in this place where I live. I want God's light and love to be made manifest everywhere I go, in every conversation I have. Because right now I think the world is desperate for that light and love to be made manifest.

I realize that this is a big ask. But just assuming for a moment that I want this, too, the question is, how on earth would we do that?

I think it might actually start by believing in the truth of this story. But it takes faith to believe that.

Matthew pulls the curtain back here to give us a better view, to give us a glimpse of Christ's deep nature, but it still takes faith to see it and to believe it.

It takes faith to believe Jesus said who he was. But if we're going to be Epiphany people, then it also takes faith to believe we are who he said we are.

It did for Peter. *Lord, he says, it is good for us to be here.* It's one of scripture's great understatement. But it's more than that. It's among the first confessions of Christian faith in history.

What's so wonderful and liberating is that he doesn't understand a thing that he's saying. Or a think he's seeing. He simply gives voice here to what his heart knows to be true. *Lord, it's good for us to be here.*

But it's easy to feel and believe such things when you're on the mountain, standing next to a man whose white hot divinity threatens to start your hair on fire. But for those of us who've not had this mountaintop experience, how do you get this faith?

Well for some lucky few it comes naturally. It seems some folks are just born believing. It's an aptitude, like the ability to play music by ear, or to pick up a golf club and lace a drive down the middle of the fairway on your very first swing.

For some believing is as easy as breathing. For others it's like sweating blood. It was like that for Kathleen Norris. Many of you will know that name. She is the author of the best selling books, *Dakota*, and *The Cloister Walk* and more recently, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

And she's just as honest as can be that this faith stuff is not like breathing for her. It's more like learning Chinese. In fact doubt came much more naturally for her than faith did.

So how did this faith come to her? Well, I'm not sure you're going to love this answer: it came by affirming the faith, again and again.

If you don't love that answer, not to worry. Kathleen Norris didn't like it either.

She tells the story about a somewhat exasperating exchange between a modern-minded seminary student and an old school Greek Orthodox theologian at Yale Divinity School. The story captures some of her struggle with experience of coming to faith.

The student was struggling with some of the claims in the Nicene Creed--which happens to be the old creed in Christendom.

"What can one do," the student asked, "when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?" The professor responded, "Well, you just say it, it's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart."

"But how can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe."

"Well," he replied, "it's not your Creed. Just keep saying it and you'll eventually get it. For some it takes longer than others."

There's deep truth in that observation. It's a variation on the idea that we make the path by walking. Mind you, twenty-one centuries after the fact, we understand the need to update our creedal language and our theological concepts, which is why we use a variety of affirmations of faith.

But even so, the idea that we come to faith by affirming the faith may not persuade you.

It may not convince you that this will help you believe Jesus is who he says he is, or that it will help you believe we are who he says we are.

If that's the case, and it may be for at least a few of you, let me try a different tack. Let me affirm that faith for you.

Because starting on Monday evening, I saw with my own eyes what it means to be Epiphany people. I experienced for myself what it means to make God's love and light and presence manifest.

I saw it at the hospital on Monday night, and then again on Tuesday morning, when a few of you who were particularly close to Mike and Pat came to the waiting room of the ICU to sit with her.

I saw it through the week when you took food to the Levi household and checked in with Pat in the process.

I saw it on Friday when a whole battalion of you arrived to help set up the fellowship hall for the reception, following Mike's service.

I saw it when heaven knows how many of you brought food to grace those tables, to help make that reception so convivial and welcoming.

I saw it when a bunch of you stayed afterwards to clean up -- so that when the rest of us walked in here today we found the space spic and span and re-set for the work we now need to do of carrying on after such a hard loss.

I saw it after the service when you wrapped Pat in a loving embrace.

So, don't tell me it's not true because I saw it with my own eyes. I experienced it for myself.

And here's the thing: this was not the first time I've seen this whole place glow with such light. Not the first time I've felt like this whole space was with love.

So whether or not you are ready to believe this, I know it to be true: you are the light of the world.

You are Epiphany people.