

EXODUS 34:29-35
PSALM 99
II CORINTHIANS 3:12-4:2
LUKE 9:28-36 (37-43a)

Last Sunday after Epiphany
Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 27, 2022; Year C

Trans!

Trans! In my estimation, never has there been a more descriptively important word that suddenly, only recently, has been filled with so much controversy and consternation, so much vitriol, laced with so much toxicity, loaded in every way imaginable! Ironically, when I did the infamous Google search in search of a definition of “trans,” one of the immediate comments was that this benignly innocent prefix is now considered a derogatory term, full of negative connotations. And if they are saying this, whoever they is, because they consider “transgender” to be a negative term, and I am completely certain, I have no doubt whatsoever, they are doing just that very thing, as they lead with a huge and erroneous assumption about a certain ostracized people group in making what is a very inappropriate and highly biased and predisposed prejudicial pronouncement. This blatantly abusive bias and bigotry is based in a horrible attitude toward some special individuals uniquely created in the divine image! Pardon the pun but “trans” transcends numerous terminologies. Let me count the ways, just to name a few: transmission, transaction, transfer, translate, transubstantiation, for you former Catholics in the room, transformation and Transfiguration, yes, the place where we are headed today! And don’t forget the newly minted and now infamous “transfer portal” in college football! Yes, some people are transgender! Jesus was Transfigured! Go figure! Just what shallow soul died and made this rule, associating “trans” with negative energy and imagery, when many of us find the idea of “trans” being completely the opposite, at the least what we now understand to be a

normal human expression, yes, seeing these beautiful individuals, interpreting their stories, in a very positive light, a most positive image? When did this shift in meaning happen? When did this seismic shift occur? What gives? Or as is in vogue now, “Wait, what?” I have been itching for the right moment to get that new phrase into a sermon! Today is the day!

Call me naïve, but I simply assumed that there would be a simple definition for “trans!” Silly me! And, in the interest of full disclosure, yes, I did find that as well! I did find a straight-forward, pardon another pun, definitional answer for “trans,” however, basically defining the word, a prefix meaning “on or to the other side of, across or beyond, through, and finally, to change, the definition I hoped to find. Hopefully all human beings are “trans” in some form or another, proof positive we are alive, changing and evolving day by day, yes transforming, even transitioning, perhaps Transfiguring, with every breath we take. Yes, Jesus was Transfigured, whatever constituted that greatest mystery wrapped in much enigma, one of the most bizarre, strangest, weirdest, recollections recorded in the Bible, found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s Gospels. **Whatever it was, perhaps still is, Transfiguration can certainly be described as the epitome, serve as the ultimate descriptive expression of awe and wonder-producing life-altering, life-changing, transcendence! And with these holy mysteries, these mysterious images, now before us, we are ready to explore just what these things, as odd as they may appear on a first, second, or any subsequent glance, might mean for us in our contemporary, twenty-first century setting today. And after hearing all this “transy” psychobabble, I have probably put every one of you in a trance. Oh, wrong word! And off we go!**

The first thing that fascinates me about this ethereal story recorded by the synoptic Gospel writers, therefore, minus the Gospel of John, a narrative tale of legendary status, stretching our minds far beyond the

comprehensible. As with all the miracle stories that challenge and threaten us postmodern, twenty-first century intellectually curious, critical thinkers, doubters, skeptics, and cynics alike, not only does this story blow our minds, but it nags at us with the usual questions about legitimacy, the normal inquiries about whether these biblical musings constitute literal, factual history. Or not! In other words, did it happen, or did it not, happen, at least according to the way it was first told and then written, or perhaps, maybe the answer lies, as is often the case in biblical speak, somehow to be found somewhere in the middle. As post-scientific, space-age people, let us give ourselves permission to not wallow in the minutiae, to get bogged down in the details, to obsess on the historicity of what was either an event or an imaginative, perhaps even dreaming or delusional, manifestation of holy substance. No matter the answer to the literalization riddle, it is the meaning in the mystery that remains the essential, the most important part of the discussion. Yes, here we go again as we analyze a biblical text, the message beautifully transcending any timebound, earthly, interpretation. What does this story, what does Jesus' and the disciples' Transfiguration, tell us about our lives and our faith? In many ways we remain as stumped now as Peter, James, and John were in that transcendent and bellwether moment in time.

Part of what I enjoy about this text is what I consider its humor, the comical aspect of this highly speculative narrative. First, I always wonder what it was that triggered Jesus' sudden desire on that specific day on the calendar, causing him to want to ascend the great heights of a mountain, to go up on the mountaintop for whatever it was that he thought he might find, whatever it was that he perceived that might just happen to be going to transpire there in the rarified thin air. And so, he plays favorites, picking his three faves, Peter, James, and John, his closest disciples, unless you happen to step outside the canon of scripture and read the fascinating noncanonical Gospel of Mary, as in Mary Magdalene, who claims to be number one! But I digress; I often

do! I always wonder what the other nine were thinking, being as how they were not allowed to come to this private, invitation only party—and oh what a party it must have been—to participate in what became a great, the grandest, adventure, not privy to the miraculous magic on the mountain, a story for the ages. And that is why we get to read it today! I remember as a child and being the youngest, subservient to my older brother, the many events that he got to attend while I stayed home and pouted, very annoyed and upset at this unfair pecking order. Surely, the nine were mystified and probably miffed, a little more than upset, no doubt greatly displeased, surely more than just a touch. After all, we read in the Gospels of some toxic banter between the disciples as they jockeyed for power and privilege among the group, here and in the afterlife, some palpable jealousy on their part in their collective DNA! My hunch is that they were most frustrated, not so gracious because they were blatantly, glaringly, missing from the guest list, not a mere oversight. The pain of believing they were somehow inferior and were not worthy of what turned out to be an inflection point in the life, mission and ministry, of Jesus, a monumentally defining moment that would shift everyone's collective dynamic, participant or not, as the cross would suddenly begin to loom on the horizon, a date with death's destiny that would challenge each disciples' commitment while shaking them to their core.

Once the disciples had ascended, and found themselves on the mountaintop, traditionally Mount Tabor, a mountain that became known as the mount of Transfiguration, surely there must have been an air of expectation, some palpable suspense, a certain aura perhaps, an anticipation that indeed indicated that something was up, as we say, that something wild and wonderful was about to happen. I wonder if Jesus gave the three carefully chosen disciples any advance warning, any preparation, giving them even the slightest clue of what was about to transpire. Or did he keep quiet, all to himself, allowing the moment to magically and surprisingly unfold before them like a

divine fireworks display, Jesus just waiting to catch a glimpse of the amazed and perplexed looks on their surprised, even shocked, faces, a Kodak, Kodachrome, moment when Jesus suddenly turned as white as a sheet, bleached as if by Clorox, glowing like a neon light. I mean, think about it. Here they were, the four of them standing around, making small talk, curiosity flapping in the subtle breeze, when suddenly out of nowhere, as if teleported, like Star Trek, uh, let's go with transported, from another dimension, another world, another universe, came two unexpected but clearly invited guests, crashing this ethereal but very earthly party, a sacred summit indeed. Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets, magically appeared as if out of thin air, as real as any transcendent experiential reality could be. A theophany is a theological term denoting the appearance or manifestation of a deity. While this was certainly not that in this instance, it was very close, the next best thing! Yes, this event would crystalize as an experience of a lifetime and beyond! Monumental! Obviously, it was as unbelievable as it was unsettling, as incredible as it was incomprehensible, all of it indefinable, unexplainable, inexpressible. And that is when the story really gets funny and a might wierd, the festivities taking a bit of an unfortunate turn. Peter, looking like an anxious, the most nervous, guy on his first date with a gal at the movie theatre, hopelessly, hopefully, wondering if might possibly get lucky enough to hold his date's hand—all us guys have been there—this rocky disciple was as anxious and antsy as he could get, wired like a cat on a hot tin roof, fidgety in every way imaginable, uncomfortable to the ninth power. Anxiety is such a mood killer, such a party pooping emotion! The awkward silence was deafening! Somebody say something! Somebody break the stillness, squelching whatever spell was in the offing! So, Peter—it was always Peter—who just had to speak, who just had to say something, no matter how stupid or irrelevant, no matter how out of touch, out to lunch, however tone deaf, his inane, inappropriate, and irresponsible, comments might be! Peter just never seemed to know when to shut

his mouth, always suffering from a severe case of foot-in-mouth disease. And yes, I resemble that remark, though making a fairly good living out of it! In fairness to the Rock, however, many of us have succumbed, have struggled to find our comfort zones when confronted with any level of awkwardness, especially the kind commensurate with any perceived level of holiness. These suspended, seemingly frozen, moments in time, suspended animation, just seemed to breed an insecurity, perhaps because of our humanity juxtaposed against any perception of deity, anytime we mortals dare engage the sacred, when confronted with the overwhelming sense of awe and wonder that is only manifest in the transcendence of the rarest of holy moments. Sometimes we do not know what to do with the tension or with ourselves, and so we do what Peter did, we babble away, hoping, scrambling, to find and say the right words, something that might make even a modicum of sense, at least at the minimum to us, hoping to calm our sensibilities, but unfortunately compounding our nervous and counter-productive energy. And yes, we usually fail miserably, embarrassing, even humiliating, ourselves in the process! Bonus!

And it was not only what Peter said that is so comical and disturbing, and all at the same time, but what he wanted to do in this vain and foolish attempt to preserve the moment for posterity, to crystalize, concretize, and even institutionalize this holy summit, binding it in perpetuity, like a picture framed for the wall for all time. Peter wanted to trade his fisherman skills to that of a carpenter, perhaps getting a few instructional tips from the Rabbi who used to do that for a living. You cannot make up this stuff! Yes, Peter wanted to build three booths, three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, assuming I guess, that the three disciples now observing the incredibly curious proceedings taking place were in no need of temporary or permanent housing. Yes, we need to organize this field trip! We need some human choreography as if the presumed hand of

God was inadequate for this adventure. And just as suddenly as Jesus had been made aglow, flashing like a neon light, white as the proverbial ghost, and after a brief pause and some interesting conversation—oh how I wish we were privy to the content of their brief dialogue—Moses and Elijah vanished in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, despite having just arrived on the scene. This briefest encounter was all over in a flash, Jesus returning to his white, blond hair and blue eyed self, not, and Moses and Elijah vanishing into thin air, teleported, yes transported, back to the place from whence they had come. Time for the foursome, complete with a great and unbelievable story to tell hopefully receptive ears, despite Jesus telling them directly to tell no one about what they had witness. How'd that work out? After all, we have the story here in print! Somebody told! Yes, time to go back down the mountain and into the valley and resume the work, back to the oft boring routine of the ordinary, the daily grind of life, because no one can indefinitely stay on the mountaintop. Eventually, inevitably, everyone must go back to the valley, whatever constitutes anyone's personal valleys.

Understanding the mountaintop as a utopian metaphor, we quickly realize and acknowledge that it is impossible to replicate what is always limited as a onetime event. We can never return to that special and specific mountaintop moment no matter how hard we try or no matter our longing. We cannot repeat it! We cannot bottle it! We cannot save or preserve it! As Eddie Money sang, "I wanna go back and do it all over!" Ain't gonna happen! We can remember it, however, revisiting it in our minds as often as we like! We call it nostalgia, that tear-jerking emotional response elicited in our fondest memories. No, we cannot go back in time! Tell that to Putin, who wants to rebuild the powerhouse Soviet Union! Fool! We cannot go back to whatever constituted our Camelot, whatever Camelot appeared to have once been, knowing those glory days, the way it used to be, was probably nothing more than a mirage. Make America great again? No, we cannot even revisit for a moment, other than in our minds'

memories, any halcyon, salad days! Even knowing all that experientially and intellectually, as real as it was or seemed, or was not, even as delusional as it may have been, the hope is that the mountain climber is permanently changed by the experience, what was and is a life altering existential reality, no matter its literal reality, yes Transfigured, yes, the biblical equivalent of transformation, never to be the same again.

And of course, there is always an inherent danger down in the valley, just think of the Twenty-Third Psalm, the valley described as a shadowy place of darkness and death, hiding the evil that lurks at every threatening bend along life's pathway. As our annual celebration of Black History Month comes to a close this weekend, we are reminded of someone special who described a dreamy world, indeed, experiencing a mountaintop moment, sensing what it was like to visit the top of the mountain and see the great vista beyond and below, catching a glimpse of a better society, a more perfect union. A day later, back down in the valley, King was assassinated, a reminder that visionaries often perish, taken from us way too soon, their destiny sealed as a most unfortunate fate. King was a highly intuitive man who knew he would never enter the promised land of an American utopia, predicting his own death the day before he died, murdered by an assassin's bullet, knowing fully, dying grace perhaps, that he would never have the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of his labors, a fulfillment of what would be a most joyful experience, despite his leadership as a major instrument, a main cog in the Civil Rights wheel. Yes, it could be argued that King almost single-handedly created, ushering in a new and glorious day embracing a new vision, his dream. Ironically, once Jesus left the mount of Transfiguration, he too would descend into a valley that truly was his own shadowy place of darkness and death, as he began a death march that would lead to Jerusalem and destiny's date with Calvary's cross, yes, a hill on which he chose to die, willingly dying for everything he believed and fought

to bring to life, all the gracious gifts of love and peace and mercy that literally defined the person of the historical Jesus, the man from Nazareth. Oh, irony of ironies. Yes, the valley of Lent beckons, calling each one of us by name!

Whatever it was that happened on that mountaintop that day, no matter how routine or ordinary, no matter how extravagant, no matter how embellished or exaggerated, surely something happened, something of great import, of much significance. And whatever it was, it had a life changing impact on the participants, those who were privy, fortunate, lucky, or blessed enough to turn aside and see this great sight, something of biblical proportions on the level of a burning bush or a parting sea. Whatever it was it put a permanent imprint, a divine imprimatur, on Jesus and Peter and James and John, a stamp that would linger long after their descent from the mountaintop. Of that we are assured, though never knowing even remotely what kind of private, personal, transformation this Transfiguration had on these public pilgrims. And perhaps that is the way it should be, for so much, perhaps most, of our religious experiences are private affairs, only meaningful to the one who is blessed with the experience. One person's religious meaning is another person's so what, next-to-nothing, the equivalent of arguing over the merits of a turnip!

While we can never replicate whatever it was that amounted to the equivalent of that mountaintop moment, our hope when we gather each week for worship in this hallowed hall, this sacred space, Sanctuary indeed, coming together as one as beloved faith community is that we will create a safe and welcoming and inclusive, the quintessential loving gracious space to allow for those rare, serendipitous and mystical moments of spirituality, of spiritual awakening. Metaphorically, we set a table each and every week, crafting some words, picking some hymns, saying some prayers, all in the hope that someone, a few, or many will find meaning, something

that changes the dynamic of that individual as they leave, never to be the same again, never to pass this way again, no matter the subtlety of even a slightest shift, yes, a tangible transformation, our version of Transfiguration. What are the things we see and experience that cause the smallest or greatest, even the most dramatic or seismic, changes with who we now are or thought we once were? Yes, in offering our gifts to God in worship and study and relationship—fellowship—and mission—social justice—we receive in return our own connectivity with the Divine and with one another and continue our own evolution into understanding these great mysteries we associate with God. In becoming change agents for good in the world, we too are changed. I can name the instances in my life that have had the most profound impact on my being, and I am sure each one of you has yours. One of mine was the first time I encountered a liberal, liturgical Baptist Church, never before even knowing that such a rare thing existed. My faith and my career careened from that Christmas Eve night in a radically different and new direction, a complete 180-degree turn. I have never looked back have I had any desire to do so. Either by the grace of God or luck or happenstance, or good fortune, or blessing, I chose to visit that neighboring church on that sacred evening, despite being warned by my paranoid fundy pastor that this was a devil-worshipping church. Warning Will Robinson! Warning!

Our job is to create as many metaphorical mountaintops as we can conceive, in everything we do, even when conducting our mundane, our routine, ordinary, somewhat boring and pedestrian business on occasion. The inherent goal in all our ecclesial machinations is to not only enable, but to embolden and empower, to be a catalyst, for helping not only ourselves, but everyone else who randomly comes our way, to discover, hopefully encountering and engaging, the divine that is within all of us. Yes, because, while the still speaking Spirit within may seem to be dormant, sleeping, it is definitely already there, just waiting to be activated by our want and will. Our hope is to be a

harbinger of the good news of God, yes, the gospel as revealed in the very full life of Jesus, to usher in the realm of God in as much as is divinely and humanly possible in this life, despite the obstacles, the cloudiness that constantly confronts our best efforts, intentions, and vision. **Yes, we want to be a place that makes Transfiguration a reality manifest in our midst and not just weird words on a page. Yes, it is a tall order! But yes, it is doable with the help of God and our covenantal commitment to one another as beloved faith community.** Of course, these mystical musings of mysterious quality, the very Mystery of the Divine, has already begun within us, and so it continues. May it be ever so, day by day by day. Be changed when change is needed! Continue to evolve in every organic way that humans grow and mature! **Be transformed! Be Transfigured! And let your light so shine, glowing like the sun!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is transforming us daily, Transfiguring us into the perfect human creatures we were created to be, transgender folks included! Amen and amen!