

Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Transfiguration of the Lord  
II KINGS 2:1-12  
PSALM 50:1-6  
II CORINTHIANS 4:3-6  
MARK 9:2-9  
February 11, 2024

### ***Double Taking!***

**Today we ponder our annual observance celebrating all things Transfiguration, a high and holy feast day, a festival celebration that besides from the spectacular story intimately describing the transfiguring aura surrounding Jesus, a tale as old as time, is found in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Transfiguration also includes the great epic text from the Hebrew Bible found in the second book of Kings, the legend of Elisha's request of his mentor Elijah that he be blessed to receive a double portion of the prophet's spirit before Elijah would be whisked away in a fiery chariot into heaven. I immediately thought of the 1966 hit song "Double Shot (of my baby's love)"! Shout out to Valentine's Day! Had to get that in there! Just a friendly reminder to those who might need one! As I considered our conversation about the sermon for today, I could not help but think of the many ways the word "double" is used in a plethora of expressions. You just got an excellent example of the "double shot," always a good thing whether it is espresso or your favorite libation, tequila always getting a nod. There is always the subtle "double entendre," making two points in one, one of which often expresses something naughty but hopefully nice. You never want to "double dribble" in basketball! People who are "double trouble" are to be avoided. A "double your money back" guarantee is great if a product fails to live up to the hype. "Doubling back" is a good move is someone is following you too closely, clearly gaining on your tail. Don't look back! "Double your pleasure, double your fun" was the marketing gimmick for Double Mint gum! A body double can be confusing, and I would hate to see the one that looked like me! And beware those who live a "double life," because they are "double trouble!" Oh, we covered that one! And never "double dip" at a fondue party, especially during this never-ending**

season of respiratory illness spreading. And for all you cheese heads, national cheese fondue day is coming, yes, April 11<sup>th</sup>! And then there is the “double take!” As we reflect on these texts for today this phrase takes on a double meaning. And enough is enough!

**Today we attempt to enter an impossible but not an imaginary world deeply immersed in mystery, awe and wonder, yes, transcendence. Transfiguration is certainly among the most transcendent of texts in all the bible, certainly so in the three synoptics, the writer of the Gospel of John choosing to leave out this mysterious story, assuming the Johannine composer had ever even heard tale of it. You know the story well, Jesus apparently playing favorites among his disciples, the rabbi choosing to take the major three on a long hike, a pilgrimage, leading Peter, James, and John, up to the top of a very high mountain, an ascension like none other. Yes, the minor nine were left behind to perhaps sulk and wonder why they were not picked, not lucky enough or perhaps faithful enough, to be privy to such a special VIP invitation. Upon arrival at the high peak, scaling the utmost heights to use some imagery from an old gospel song, suddenly Jesus became a dazzling white, lit up brighter than any LED, yes, as the biblical writer states, as if he had been bleached, indeed a snapshot capturing a Clorox moment. The profound mental images would be stamped, forever embedded as a keepsake, a lovely souvenir, every detail permanently etched in their minds, an imprimatur stamped on their very impressed consciousness. What an indelible impression this drama surely made, as impressionable as the psyches of the starstruck disciples surely were! And then suddenly, as if things could not get any weirder, out of nowhere, as if teleported Star Trek style, appeared Elijah and Moses, Elijah representing the prophets, ditto Moses with the law, yes, the whole ball of wax in these two historic, mountainous, figures. No doubt, these sudden manifestations of greatness freaked out the stunned and startled threesome, none of them knowing what to think, what to expect, what to even begin to make of these unexpected but very welcome guests. We know this because Peter, it is always Peter, it is the Rock, erstwhile blockhead, who fumbles and mumbles some inane psychobabble, nonsensical, chatter about building three shrines to offer protection for what had become a crowd, you know, two’s company, three’s a, you get it, the now big three assembled for a summit on the summit. I have always wondered, did Peter, yes, the fisherman, carry carpentry**

supplies and a toolbox with him wherever he went, just in case? If anybody was going to build an unnecessary booth it would have been Jesus who was raised by a carpenter and thus had those specific skills. I am just saying! And of course, the story would not be complete without the booming voice from above, eerily familiar, sounding just like the one demonstratively speaking at Jesus' baptism, God interrupting Peter's rambling musings with a robust, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" It was a polite way to tell Peter to "shut up and pay attention!" Add your own expletives! Should have picked Judas for this three-hour tour, or from among the rest of the B-team! As they went down the mountain, descending from this lofty vista, Jesus then makes them promise to contain their excited amazement, their amazed excitement, about all the crazy things they had just witnessed, seeing with their own eyes, everything they were watching as if slow motion. Pinky promise! **Yes, these privileged disciples had witnessed the rarest of a transcendent moment suspended in time, yes, time standing still, surely these three eyewitnesses barely able to contain themselves. Yes, this was a Kairos, a holy moment! Jesus then nonchalantly, perhaps sternly, ordered them not to tell a soul about any of it, including informing their brothers, not until after. . .! Mums the word! Our little secret! Good luck with that one! Indeed, Elijah and Moses were a double shot unlike any other. Throw in Jesus for good measure and we have got quite a trio, a trinity almost matching that of the triune God we call trinitarian and vice versa. This magnificent event was like a Super Bowl of all star players! Sorry! Had to get it in there!**

**So just what can any part of this wildly imaginative biblical tale mean to us today, to those of us who might be a bit jaded, questioning, a might skeptical or cynical, perhaps our doubts about believing any form of biblical literalism always dominating, getting in the way, interfering with a good story? As always, the question remains, are we buying at face value what they are selling? After all, it is Paul who says in the epistle lection for today from II Corinthians, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are on the road to destruction. The god (little "g") of this age has blinded the minds of those who do not have faith so the could not see the light of the gospel that reveals the glory of Christ." I mean, none of us want to be on the road to destruction, the path of perdition. Reminds me of another popular song, Blinded by the Light! And so were these bedazzled disciples, so to speak! So, our task is to find a way to find meaning in**

these deeply expressive words that demand that we get in touch with all things mystical, that we embrace the mystery, that we engage the mysterious, with all the imagination, leaning into the myth and magic, that these kinds of texts exude in their graphic portrayals. In many ways I think we find ourselves in over our heads, as we vainly try and make sense of these purported occurrences that by all accounts are far beyond our paygrade, yes, sharply turning a corner here, perhaps in the normally expected way that Elisha surely must have been overwhelmed as he considered the intimidating, the frightening, prospect of losing his teacher and guide in what is portrayed as the twinkling of an eye. The biblical storyteller describes Elijah's imminent leave taking as looming large on the horizon as the prophet of all prophets was snatched away into eternity, the end of their journey and their earthly relationship quickly coming into view. The hungry student, a devotedly loyal protégé, was now faced with the prospect of continuing on his own, wearing a mantle that, like a heavy cross to carry, he was not sure he could bear. And so, he did the only reasonable thing, he did the only thing he could do, making the only request that came to his mind. If at all possible, time to "double take!"

I have always found Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit a rather audaciously daring ask, desiring more for himself than even the great prophet Elijah was ever blessed to possess. We are told that if we have even the miniscule faith of a mustard seed that we can move a mountain, a sad commentary when you think about the prospects of accomplishing that monumental feat, revealing the absence thereof, of faith that is, once again literalism providing for us a rather dim, a very bleak, picture. Our lack of mountain moving is a depressingly daunting commentary on our faithfulness, a dismal prospect indeed, somewhat unsettling when we think about it. A double portion? We would settle for a single scoop! Imagine the possibilities. And besides, Elisha, and much later the three, shall we call them the main or primary disciples, clearly had an unfair advantage in their up close and personal experiences with the Divine, assuming for a moment that these events literally happened within the bounds of history, the confines of Chronos time described in greatest detail as factual occurrences. Supposedly, these select few got to see for themselves, to witness what was obviously an overwhelming reality, however it unfolded. Either that was the case, or they were simply delusional, a

**fate sealed as a product of their time, the writers embellishing, exaggerating, using much hyperbole in their wild mythological musings. I suspect a little bit of both! After all, even Jesus would eventually say something to the effect that blessed are those who believe by faith and not by sight, an acknowledgment of the limitations of blind acceptance. And so once again, as with so many biblical stories, we are forced to move beyond literal limitations and explore deeper meanings, go deeper as they say, whoever “they” is, engaging and exegeting pregnant words as real and relevant now as on the day these narratives were first written.** And I believe that what once seemed obvious back in the day to many, if not most, of those who first read these compositions, a perception that now appears to us to be missing when we read, but in all honesty that indeed is a good thing!

According to the legend, Elisha was granted his request as his mentor was whisked away on a fiery chariot with fiery horses. But enough with the pyrotechnic parade that carried the faithful prophet into the heavens because my focus is a little more down to earth, focusing on the part of the story that causes us to contemplate the ultimate desire of Elisha’s heart in his request for a double portion, yes, a double helping, and that is to reflect on the desire that we all have, that motivates us as followers of Jesus, believers in God in whatever way any of us choose to define God. Our hope and prayer in this life, a dream of dreams, is to experience, to realize, what is described in Romans and cited in the gospel song, Blessed Assurance, as a foretaste of glory divine, actuating a touch of holiness in our midst. It is an elusive but pervasive awareness, perhaps a feeling, even a thought, that is always a part of our search as seekers of ultimate truth and, yes, transcendence. The Celts call spaces of such import “thin places,” places allowing for transcendent moments, special places, often in a flowing field next to a spring, where heaven and earth seem to meet. So, while none of us are expecting even the slightest manifestations of biblical proportions like those presented to us today, we are still hopeful for an experience with the Divine. We, however, can no longer naively literalize the literary, to suddenly, spontaneously, expect the magnitude of a physical theophany, God in the flesh, an incarnational presence, embodying the very essence of magic and miracle. To wish for that that level of encounter to cognitively occur in our presence, in our hearing and seeing and touching, including events like the ones we read today that seem frozen in time, would be

foolish. Our quest, temporal and eternal, while being different remains the same, just like our forebears in the faith, and that is to somehow and in some way experience the presence of God in our lives. **Yes, we long in this life to sense! We lust for an existential reality that at the least points us in the right direction, though seemingly beyond the limits of our imagination. Perhaps by lowering our expectations we gain more, finding avenues of discovery we never thought possible. Yes, God is all around us, a part of everything, in everything, we see and sense and are privy to encounter in this life. God is in every one of us and in every beautiful thing that this carefully crafted, carefully designed creation has to offer. As I look out at you I see the face, the many faces, of God!** I will admit, however, that God seems to unfortunately be absent in some folks, sadly missing in action, perhaps the case with all of us in our not so proudest moments on our worst days. No doubt God is in all the created order and disorder, the symmetry of this planetary spaceship we call earth, the magnificence of this universe without end, true indicators, pointers to a grand originator moving with unlimited capacity. Our own self-consciousness, our intuitive awareness, that which separates us from the rest of the animal realm is an indicator of eternal magnitude, yes, our knowledge and wisdom of past, present, and future, yes, even our thoughtful brushes with the pangs of mortality, all of it speaks to something, that which is beyond our mortal selves. The beauty of this mystery, this mysterious presence, is that these markers are available to us each and every day of our lives in each and every experience we are privy to behold. And yet for many, this revelation, and I use that word carefully and intentionally, is unfortunately disappointing for many who are looking for spiritual fireworks. Their judgmental perception is that God no longer operates in the world, perceiving that something is now lacking, insufficient, and thus their needs are not met with what is not nearly enough, and thus they are disappointed, the anciently interpreted events from the Bible the only option, the unapproachable and unreasonable gold standard that is beyond our grasp because there is nothing to grasp, the impossible and unrealistic bar that is set way to high as the naïve desire of many a heart and mind. Not going to happen, at least that way or those ways! Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible does not offer us an ongoing and permanent model, a template laid in concrete, defining and limiting the way or ways that God will come again and again. Common sense tells us that much! We will never appreciate God's unfolding and still speaking Spirit in our presence, in our midst, in our lives, yes, in

the here and now, incapable of briefly capturing, of seizing this moment when it avails itself, if we expect God's presence to be concretized as if frozen in time, always duplicated, replicated, as the same, to be like, even remotely similar, then as now. Our reality, our experience, will never match, nor should it, the grandiose worldview of God as experienced and interpreted by our easily persuaded, some would suggest duped, biblical forebears, whose world was translated by their inherently limited understanding of reality, visuals that surely were not exactly, perhaps even remotely, as they appeared to be, as they perceived them to be. The experiences of those who bravely went before us, though surely different from what they believed them to be, even as they read these texts we now are privy to read, were certainly unique to them, uniquely their own, obviously different than ours. At the same time, however, those encounters, whatever they were or were not, were no less real for them, no less true for them than ours are for us! To expect the same result as understood through the lens of pre-scientific peoples will always lead to unreasonable expectations and serious disappointments.

**So, rather than wish for what we wish we had, the proverbial bird that is not in our hand, a pipedream that is beyond the pale, over the top, never possible and probably never was, a conversation for another day, we need to happily, gladly and joyfully, settle in the best way, to gratefully embrace what is ours to behold in the way we experience the sacred, whatever constitutes divine holiness in the narrow prisms of our lenses into reality. We must honestly entertain the parameters, the "boundaried" limitations, yes, the cutting edges, of the divine that are always elusive, subtle, but nevertheless real, persuasive, always ours to experience as they are or seem to be, if we will dare to allow them, invite them, welcome them into our sphere of being. This must suffice! This level of transcendence, whatever emotes awe and wonder within us, must be enough, always enough, because it is enough! God is all around us, surrounding us, above, beneath, within, and it is up to us to accept, embrace, this gift as a gracious gift. How could we ever reject what is a divine offering to one and all, emboldening us, empowering us, to believe by faith, the very thing we are called to do, the very reason that we are gathered in this space, this sacred sanctuary setting in every holy moment in which we gather as beloved faith community? Truly, what more could we want? As Paul asserted, we see through a dark glass, yes, a prism, a "glass darkly," to invoke a little King James Version. Christ is the**

**image of God, but an image indeed! “God said that light should shine out of the darkness! God is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” And that, my friends, is Transfiguration in a nutshell! Transfiguration is a reminder that all our devotional exercises driving our spiritual pursuits, every prayer and every humble act of devotion and gospel kindness, fueling our faithfully intellectual curiosity. Every step of faith provides an avenue, a pathway, multiple roadmaps all amazingly leading to transcendence, and transcendence is the goal, ultimately whisking us away in our own chariot toward eternal bliss. And yes, Transfiguration always calls forth the transformative power of God, transformation being the operative word here, in each and every one of us, in our lives, in our church, in our community, and in our world. After all, any and every encounter with the Divine changes us and permanently so! And while we are at it, a double portion, a double helping, would be nice, certainly would not hurt, very helpful indeed, if but on occasion!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and in the great mystery of faith transfigures us all! Amen and amen!**