

Out of the Perfection of Beauty, You Shine Forth

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

February 19, 2023, Last Sunday after Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9

Verses from Psalms 50, 104, 36 & 139:

Leader: O God, you speak and summon the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

People: Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, you shine forth.

Leader: You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.

**People: With you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.**

Leader: If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

**People: Even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Last Sunday after Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

The scriptures of all religions tell us that the Sacred Way or Great Spirit is flowing through the universe, and that the survival of the human race depends on its ability to see, understand and interpret that sacred way or spirit, and follow where it leads. Jesus calls us to metanoia, meaning to expand our hearts and minds so we can see the realm of God within and around us and live by its laws.

Today we will look at visions of transfiguration, how people have seen the Spirit revealed where it was hidden in plain sight. God's light shines not only through Jesus but also through the unconditional love, compassion and Golden Rule of humanity at its best.

We can see God shining through our love here when we reach out with care to those we do not know well and those we know are struggling. Please fill the church with that light for all to see again today, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship— Today is one of the big pivot days in the church year. We have been in the light since Christmas. As of next week we will be journeying into the deep shadows of

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Lent, but we are not going to think about that now, we are only going to note that this is the glorious last burst of light until Easter.

The Epiphany Season tells us that there is a force at work in the world that can change us and flow through us to change situations and solve problems in ways we would not have thought possible.

Let us worship together opening ourselves to that power of light...

Children’s Time— Good morning! Transfiguration Sunday recalls a time when Jesus went up a mountain to pray with three of his leading disciples, and while up there they saw Jesus transformed, a brilliant light shining from his face, his robes pure white. It didn’t last long, but all three saw this vision, and they felt the outer light was consistent with the inner light that shone through his love and wisdom, his passion for justice, and his healing, peace-making way of being in the world. For an instant they actually saw that inner light with their eyes. Then he returned to his ordinary human self and sweaty, dusty travel-worn clothes.

Jesus taught that we all have light within us, no matter how humanly messy we are. We are all God’s beloved children, we all deserve to be listened to and our beauty seen, and the realm of God is within and around us all. So on Transfiguration Sunday we look to see this hidden reality made visible, to see the world transfigured. It’s like the Spirit hides in plain sight, and we miss it most of the time, but sometimes we see.

I talked two weeks ago about Robin Wall Kimmerer who is a leading scientist as well as a Native American teacher and wise woman elder. She writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* about the Native American word, “*Puhpowee*” which “translates as ‘the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight.’” Robin writes that “As a biologist, I was stunned that such a word existed. The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything.”

The same could be said about the people who have created other spiritual traditions— Jesus, Jewish poets and prophets, Lao Tzu and countless mystics understood that there is much more to the world than we ordinarily see, like mushrooms and fungi that live under the surface of the woods floor.

We have gifts and light within us, and our task in life is to work with the Spirit to nourish them and bring them forth to shine in the world and bear fruit as the Spirit’s guidance and energy

empower us. There is something we can do to open to the Spirit and nourish our inner light and let its love shine through us... Pray!

Let us say together the Lord's Prayer...

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Out of the perfection of beauty, God shines forth, the Psalm says. Maybe you have experienced this. Maybe you have seen it in a sunset or a newborn baby's face or felt it in the expansive warmth of someone like Bill Coffin or Martha Manheim. Maybe you remember when you were a child feeling your fevered forehead soothed by a cool, gentle touch. Out of the perfection of beauty, the Spirit of the universe shines forth as a light of love.

What's fascinating about the gospel story of the Transfiguration is that there is not much beauty, let alone perfection.

We see a man in oppressed, occupied Palestine, a man who is exhausted from crowds and confrontations and is just trying to get away from it all, a man caked in sweat and dust from a long road and a mountain path.

We see his discouraged disciples whom he had to rebuke publicly only six days ago because they still don't understand what he is all about, and sure enough, they get it wrong once again up on the mountain.

It's a hard story, even offensive to our modern sensibilities with its ghosts and voice out of a cloud, yet it has been cherished by ordinary people like us for two thousand years.

Maybe we cherish it because if God can shine through those people and that situation, then maybe God can shine through us and the imperfect world around us. Maybe we cherish it because it confirms that the perfection of beauty is not the narrow slice of life that the advertising or entertainment industries suggest.

A diseased body does not seem the perfection of beauty, but if we zoom in we see the beauty of the body's immune system restoring life and health, and if we zoom out we see beautiful circles of love and care surrounding the diseased body to comfort it and help it heal.

The perfection of beauty appears by means of epiphany as a transfiguration of everyday, messy life, revealing the shining presence of the Spirit of God.

Epiphanies of transfigurations are beautiful, but they are lights that shine in the darkness to save those who are lost.

The hungrier we are, the better food tastes. Epiphanies and transfigurations are most beautiful to those who need them most, who are not living in anything like the perfection of beauty by our culture's standards.

Epiphanies and transfigurations are gifts. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says of the earth's gifts and the Spirit's gifts, "A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning.... Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery.... We do not know their source."

Paul Hawken wrote in his book, *Blessed Unrest*, "It has been said that we cannot save our planet unless humankind undergoes a widespread spiritual and religious awakening...."

"What if there is already in place a large-scale spiritual awakening and we are simply not recognizing it?" His book is based on an epiphany he had, a transfiguration that gradually appeared before his amazed eyes, shining where it had been all along, hidden in plain sight.

Paul Hawken is a veteran of the Civil Rights movement who became an environmental entrepreneur and popular author and public speaker. Some years he gives as many as one hundred talks around the world.

After every talk people crowd around him and inevitably hand him their cards. Back home he used to lay them out and look at all the different peace, justice, environmental and indigenous rights organizations, almost all small and unfamiliar to him, all motivated by love and a sense of the sacredness of life, and he would be heartened. Then he would shove the cards in a drawer.

Eventually it dawned on Hawken that he was seeing something that most other people could not see. No one knew how many different groups there were. He wrote in *Blessed Unrest*, "After spending years researching this phenomenon including creating with my colleagues a global database of its constituent organizations, I have come to these conclusions: this is the largest social movement in all of human history. No one knows its scope, and how it functions is more mysterious than what meets the eye. What does meet the eye is compelling: coherent, organic, self-organized congregations involving tens of millions of people dedicated to change.... What I see are ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing to confront despair, power

and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice and beauty to this world.”

Hawken believes he is seeing a kind of immune system at work. The spirit of life flowing through earth and human consciousness is rising to confront the disease of humanity’s abuses, and to restore the conditions needed for the survival of all life. We are the immune response of earth’s body, of God’s creation.

This is the beautiful vision of Transfiguration that we need today, because we are like those tired, sweat and dust caked disciples dragging their feet up the mountain behind a leader who calls them to lay down their lives for the cause of compassion and love. We feel small, many of us are worn out, and the forces we are struggling against seem far more powerful.

A motley group of neighbors meeting in a borrowed office or cluttered kitchen to do their pitiful little against massive evil does not look like the perfection of beauty, but step back and see hundreds of millions of people around the world doing their part to establish the realm of God’s love and justice and peace on earth, people teaching their children the golden rule and modeling it. See the perfection of beauty of that brilliant light and let that vision encourage and refresh you.

The realm of God’s love is here, now, hidden in plain sight. As the old hymn says, “In all life thou livest, the true life of all.”

Epiphanies and transfigurations remind us that the Spirit that created and evolved life is on our side, and we can turn to it with trust that it will guide and empower us now in earth’s time of desperate need.

Robin Wall Kimmerer says, “The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world.” Our task is each to find within us our share of light to shine. The voice of the Spirit in our hearts will tell us what to do with the gifts that it has given us.

So let us join this greatest movement and do our small but essential part. Let us pray in silence, opening to the Spirit’s perfection of beauty within us...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

It’s muddy out there.
I do my laps on the porch
midst the chickadees.

