

Apostles Anglican Church

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Last Sunday of Epiphany: Transfiguration

(1 Kings 19:9-18, Psalm 27, 2 Peter 1:13-21, Mark 9:2-9)

Mark 9:2 (ESV): 2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

It's really very simple; I don't know why some people find this so confusing. This is calendar year 2024. But, the liturgical year actually started with Advent 2023 in December last. So, take 2023, divide it by 3 — always by three — and note the mathematical remainder. Certainly you remember remainders from long division? For the year 2023, the remainder is 1, which corresponds to lectionary year B. And that, obviously, means that St. Mark is the appointed Gospel for this year. Got it? It's really very simple — if you are a liturgist and a mathematician.

There is a three-year cycle in the Eucharistic Lectionary: year A is the year of St. Matthew's Gospel; year B, St. Mark's, and year C, St. Luke's. Then the cycle begins again: St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, every three years. "But wait," some of you might be thinking: three years, four Gospels. What about the Gospel according to St. John? Is it so unimportant that no year is devoted to it? No: entirely to the contrary. St. John's Gospel is so important that the Church refuses to restrict its reading to a single year; portions of it are read across all three years. The three synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — recount events in Jesus' life and ministry; the Gospel according to St. John reflects deeply on those events and provides a theological commentary on their meaning. That is an oversimplification — Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke are fine theologians themselves and their Gospels are certainly reflective — but, in broad strokes the characterization is true. St. John is, after all, called *The Theologian*.

Today, we read and ponder the account of Jesus' Transfiguration according to St. Mark. Let's hear a portion of it again:

Mark 9:2–8 (ESV): 2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. 5 And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." 6 For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is

my beloved Son; listen to him.” 8 And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

St. Mark here mentions an unearthly radiance and whiteness, particularly of Jesus' clothes. What are we to make of this? St. John does not record this event; there is no parallel account in his Gospel. But, he does tell us what it means and how we are to understand it. Listen to this commentary from his Prologue:

John 1:1–5 (ESV): 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:14 (ESV): 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

St. John writes of light coming into the world, light that St. Mark pictures visually as unearthly radiance and whiteness. But, St. John tells us precisely what that light is: glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth — the glory of God, the glory of the Word who was in the beginning with God, who was and is God, and has become flesh. As St. Paul says:

2 Corinthians 4:6 (ESV): 6 For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ: that is what St. John — and St. Paul — says the disciples saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. St. John should know; he was there.

Glory: *kavod* in the Hebrew Old Testament, *doxa* in the Greek New Testament. But, regardless of language, what is it — what is *glory*? Linguistically, the words connote weightiness/gravitas, dignity, honor, splendor, brightness. Yes, all of these apply to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; all apply to what the disciples witnessed in the transfiguration. But, St. John would have us to understand glory as far more than this.

God's glory is his self-revelation of goodness, truth, and beauty, of holiness and power, of divine love. It is not the very essence of God as he is known only to himself within and among the Trinity. But this glory is God's self-revelation of himself to us insofar as we can receive and withstand it. God's glory in the Transfiguration is hymned in the Church with these words:

You were transfigured upon the mount, O Christ our God, and your disciples, insofar as they could bear, beheld Your glory (Kontakion of the Transfiguration).

It is not for nothing that in the traditional icons of the Transfiguration the disciples are flat on their faces before the glory of the Lord. Only insofar as they could bear, they beheld the glory of Christ our God. As Fleming Rutledge expresses it:

[Glory] is [God's] radiant *revelation of himself*, an emanation of his attributes that humans can receive only by faith. It is his outgoing, self-revelation perceived by disciples as dazzling radiance, yes — but more importantly still, as absolute power (Fleming Rutledge, *Epiphany: The Season of Glory*, InterVarsity Press (2023), p. 21).

And one falls on one's face in the presence of absolute power, of power that called creation into being with but a word. That is what the three disciples saw in the Transfiguration, and they saw it revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Not so very much later, Philip, who was not on the Mount, who did not see this glory said to Jesus:

John 14:8b-9a (ESV): 8..."Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Yes, that is the message of the Transfiguration. The unearthly radiance and whiteness of the Transfiguration is the glory of God the Father in the face of God the Son — of the Son who from that moment of transfiguration sets his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem to reveal God's glory in a manner beyond our understanding: the glory of God in the face and body of a betrayed, denied, shamed, beaten, crucified — dead and buried — rejected King of the Jews. The Transfiguration and the Crucifixion are the bookends of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and the entire narrative arc of Scripture — the redemptive plan of God — unfolds between them.

In this narrative arc of Scripture, the glory of God acts powerfully to accomplish three purposes, more than three, really, but three which come together in Jesus on the mountain. The glory of God (1) breaks out to destroy, (2) breaks in to purify, and (3) breaks through to transfigure.

In the Lord of Spirits podcast, the hosts speak, not infrequently, of "death by holiness," seen many times in the Old Testament and occasionally in the New Testament. Simply put, a recalcitrant, unrepentant sinner — one who adamantly and rebelliously refuses to return to the Lord — risks destruction by the Lord's glory, a glory that breaks out to destroy.

Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden, not so much as punishment — though that element is present, too — but for their protection. Due to their rebellion, they could no longer safely dwell in the presence of God's glory.

Later, God appeared on Sinai to give the Law.

Exodus 19:21–25 (ESV): 21 And the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. 22 Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.” 23 And Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’ ” 24 And the Lord said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.” 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Further on in the narrative, Aaron’s own sons — priests — were destroyed by the glory of the Lord.

Leviticus 10:1–3 (ESV): 10 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’ ” And Aaron held his peace.

This theme runs throughout the prophets, not least Amos.

Amos 5:6–7 (ESV): 6 Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,
7 O you who turn justice to wormwood
and cast down righteousness to the earth!

We could multiply examples throughout the Old Testament narrative. In the New Testament, there is Paul’s warning about partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ in an unworthy manner: by so doing many of the Corinthians had become weak and ill, and many had died (cf 1 Cor 11:27ff). And there is the strange account of Ananias and Sapphira, struck dead by God for lying to the Holy Spirit.

These are sobering and cautionary tales for those who dare come into the presence of God’s glory unworthily, God’s glory that, in some such cases, breaks out to destroy.

But the glory of God also breaks in to purify as we see in Isaiah’s encounter with the Lord.

Isaiah 6:1–7 (ESV): 6 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Here the purifying glory of the Lord is mediated to Isaiah by a seraph, a throne guardian angel. The name says so much: seraphim, the burning ones. These holy servants of God who stand in his presence are burning with the fire of his glory even though they cover their eyes with their wings. Is it any wonder that Isaiah cries out that he is undone in his sinfulness — Woe is me! — because he has seen the King, the Lord of hosts? While his sin might indeed merit “death by holiness,” his repentance brings instead purification by glory.

The same is true generations before when the Lord, I Am That I Am, first appears to Moses.

Exodus 3:1–6 (ESV): 3 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” 4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” 5 Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Moses is not destroyed, but, like Isaiah yet to come, he is purified and commissioned.

Much later still in the Biblical narrative, the fisherman Peter falls at Jesus’ knees in his boat having seen the glory of God revealed in the miraculous draft of fishes, and he pleads, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (cf Luke 5:1 ff). But, Jesus has other ideas. Glory breaks in to purify the repentant, and then sends them on mission.

And, lastly, the glory of the Lord breaks through to transfigure. Moses entered the glory of the Lord in the tent of meeting and he was transfigured for a time; his face became so radiant with the glory of God, “that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’

face because of the glory” (cf Ex 34:35, 2 Cor 3:7). And, drawing upon this St. Paul says:

2 Corinthians 3:17–18 (ESV): 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

As we behold the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ, we, too, are being transfigured — transformed into the very likeness of his glory.

Yes, in the great redemptive narrative arc of Scripture the glory of God (1) breaks out to destroy, (2) breaks in to purify, and (3) breaks through to transfigure. And these energies of the glory of God come rushing together on the mount as Jesus is transfigured — revealed to be the very glory of God — before Peter, James, and John.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — the glory seen on the Mount of Transfiguration and on Mount Calvary — breaks out to destroy not the sinner, but sin itself. It comes to shine the light on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace — to end exile and illumine the way home.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — the glory seen on the Mount of Transfiguration and on Mount Calvary — breaks in to purify so that the words spoken on the Mount of Beatitudes might be true of us: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt 5:8).

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — the glory seen on the Mount of Transfiguration and on Mount Calvary — breaks through to transfigure. Once we were dead in trespasses and sin, once we followed the fallen powers, once we were slaves to the passions of the flesh, but now through Christ — through the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places, transfigured from slaves to sons and daughters of God (cf Gal 2:1 ff). Now, through Jesus, we may come boldly before the throne of grace, into the presence of the glory of God (cf Heb 4:16).

This is what we, in our best moments, long for and hope for and pray for. It is something we should never take lightly or for granted. Lord, let your glory break out to destroy every last vestige of sin in us. Lord, let your glory break in to purify us of every defiling remnant of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Lord, let your glory break through to transfigure us into the image of your Son.

We dare not pray these things lightly. It is an awful thing to see the glory of the Lord, as Scripture attests. We will find ourselves on our faces, which is good and right, but also fearful and humbling. The Anglican poet John Donne captures this so beautifully in his Holy Sonnet XIV:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Mark 9:2 (ESV): 2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.

Amen.