



Glorious!

February 27, 2022

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday
Luke 9:28-36; 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:6
The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

Lt. Quentin Curtis is in his 34th and final year with the Chicago Fire Department. He recalls what a glorious job it's been for him. And he laments, 1,000 Blacks in the Department when he began has dwindled to 300. There are many reasons, including shadows of bias and discrimination that mean so few see firefighting as an option. "I'm a Chicago firefighter today for one reason," he explains. "At 12 years old, I'd seen my first Black fireman, and at that point, I decided that's what I want to be.... you can't be what you can't see," he concludes.¹ We can't be what we can't see.

It reminds me of a Black theology prof who invited us to imagine Jesus—who he was / still is, his witness of faith—like someone who's inspired us. Jesus is a teacher, like one who saw in us what life could be. Jesus is a healer, like a doctor or nurse who restored us. Jesus is an activist, community-building peacemaker like ... who do we admire? My prof imagined Jesus like his fire-fighter father who was "on the nob"—holding the nozzle to direct the spray. It's the hardest job, because of the volume and force of water coming out—trying to hold it steady where it needs to be. A job unable to be done without others holding the line of hose. We're on the line, he imagined, as Jesus is on the nob.

How do we see living faith? Jesus. Us. God's purpose fulfilled. We cannot be what we cannot see.

It was a glorious moment on that mountain. Jesus as they'd never really seen him, fully perceived him—radiant with Holy Light and Divine Life. A wondrous sight—can we feel it? So, astounding, comforting, joyous—raising yearning hearts, inspiring Peter to want to bask in that glory. Hey, let's camp out here a while! Why not forever?! Peter's such a comfort for us, because he's so earnest but clueless. Like the snowman dude from *Frozen* who dreams of summer sun on a sandy beach. Like me thinking I could write music like Beethoven or Bono, sing like Beyoncé, jump and twist like Simone Bile or Nathan Chen. Peter is a fisherman out of water, who keeps the bar low for us! He doesn't get it—what Jesus is really about, and by association who we are, by extension what God calls us to do. Luke tells the whole gospel story to help us truly see Jesus, and believe—giving our lives to be his way in the world. This scene accents that sacred point. As much as dazzling radiance in his clothes, set atop a mountain like Moses, Elijah and others experiencing God's presence ... Luke urges us, friends: see that the rest of Jesus' ministry—all the other stuff he tells us about ordinary people and events transformed with new life—those holy moments radiate heavenly glory. Common, human become divine.

You see, we get this glorious glimpse like an LED billboard saying: pay attention! An emergency vehicle coming at us with lights flashing and sirens blaring. It's a narrative turning point for Luke. Until now, Jesus has been known as Joseph's son, prophet, teacher, healer, blasphemer, one who eats with sinners. He's just alerted his close friends to the cost of following—where they're going ... the cross. And when they come down the mountain, Jesus sets his face and departs for Jerusalem. On exodus—that's the word—like Moses leading Hebrews long ago. Except Peter's not sure he wants to go. He does get, like you and me, how difficult life can be. Yeah, I've climbed mountain tops, been in beautiful places like our stunning sanctuary, seen through others' eyes like architects for our Pine Island Chapel last week—amazed, astounded, comforted, joyous, hearts raised. “May I sing to hear the acoustics,” she asked? “*Ubi caritas, et amor, Deus ibi est ...*” as our choir sang last

week. Yeah, friends, at times I wish these glorious mountain-top moments we share each week could continue forever.

Then we go out the doors, down the steps, into the world of ordinary life—at best, yearning to share Divine Glory. And so, Olympic athletes return home with medals or disappointments. Euphoria fading, often falling into deep depression. What is life after celebrated achievement just to be there, whatever happens—as Olympians Simone Biles, Chloe Kim, Mikaela Shiffrin have tried to be honest about. And so, it may be with thespians on stage at the end of a run in which they've invested joyous heart and soul in learning lines, choreography, and song, building relationships, receiving applause. Then the auditorium empties and lights go out. So it feels as our world descends from Olympic spectacle into explosive war. Even amid political questions and tensions in Beijing, still so often, we saw heart-warming scenes when competitors in uniforms of various nations embraced no matter who won. Now we see horrific images of bombed neighborhoods, battered living rooms, bandaged bloody faces, a car totally crushed by an armored vehicle out of which miraculously an elderly man walked away. As innocents cower in subways and unarmed protestors get assaulted, arrested, embraced by others uniformed with guns and combat gear, not skis, skates, and boards.

It's hard to see when we want the world to be so different. Jesus. Us. God's purpose. As this tragedy unveils twisted, deluded imagination, we see that stakes of what we envision are as high as mountain peaks. Tragically, friends, it aligns with the geography of our text this week. The sun-bathed Mount of Transfiguration on our cover rises over the shadowed valley of Megiddo. From which we get Armageddon—naming our most fearfully imagined horrors of hellish destruction. It's been said those fields are so fertile because of all the blood shed over millennia of battling armies.

Peter and his companions ascended out of that valley with Jesus. In a mountain top epiphany they saw his glory, a vista of what living faith could be. They began to understand, enveloped in a mist of Divine Presence. As they feared what lie ahead, a heavenly voice urged: “This is my chosen one. Listen. Trust him!” Paul wasn’t there, of course. Still, that’s why he writes. That’s what he gets people in Corinth, like us, to do. Rise above Roman persecution and conflict in their congregation. Listen to Jesus. See life as God wants it for all people, in community, amid creation. Be that presence of grace, that power of love in our healing, teaching, forgiving, serving others more than self. Embody holy purpose in our ordinary humanity.

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive!” That’s one of my favorite expressions from earliest Christians. That’s how Paul urges Corinthians to see themselves. Not quite Jesus on the nob and them holding the line. See ourselves as light. Divine Illumination out of darkness at creation shines through our hearts. See it reflected in the mirror, transformed bit by bit ever more fully, the luminous glory of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ. We perceive blessed moments of grace, goodness, beauty—sacred encounters. We yearn to be so glorious, bearing that holy radiance. We redirect, focus, intensify heavenly beams of love even as we live through darkest patches of life and places of our world. Friends, we know we don’t create it on our own. We pray, we sing: Christ be our Light.

A veil lifts. As honestly as facing a mirror, we see how to live authentically—who we are most defined by being God’s beloved children, most alive when we’re generous, creating vitality, giving life to others, in our world as we know it. Maybe the familiar image of a lighthouse fits us in Michigan. You know, how a system of mirrors and prisms reflects the light source, focusing it to penetrate dense fog or deep darkness. That’s how we see to talk with a friend who’s as gloomy as an Olympian come home; give food to those whose cupboards are bare; use our voice to speak for others who too often remain voiceless in society. Or maybe we imagine

a candle, a fireplace, a flashlight, car lights ... I like to envision us together as stained glass for the world. Such variety of shapes and colors, ordered by the Artistic Spirit moving among us to cast inspiring hues of grace and mercy and peace upon the world, in the shape in Jesus Christ from a favorite gospel story—a healing, a parable, a courageous witness. Whatever way he lived before and after he went up the Mount of Transfiguration. Glorious!

Friends, here's the gospel promise Marilyn McEntyre echoes for us. Even when our vessel seems empty, we are full of light dancing, splaying into rainbows. We ever dwell amidst what we cannot fully know or hold or keep—as Peter struggled to accept on that mountain top. Still each shard of color is a revelation—the best of our making and doing bearing witness to what light lies beyond and shines through darkened glass.

Glorious! I saw that color in a lengthy phone conversation this week. She's faced a difficult time recently. Confined at home, abilities and basic energy not what they once were, grieving. She reflected on a current situation in the long exodus life can seem, with a core yearning always compelling: have I done enough? I tried to help her heart settle in peace, release burdens and renew purpose still finding ways to love however she can now. That's when a sacred memory flickered, bearing light and warmth after all these years. She'd worked with some of the most troubled kids in school—seen a lot of darkness and shadows of human brokenness. And in a moment of what must have been special tenderness one child observed: “You must be a Christian.” Friends, I've no idea what that meant for the child, nor exactly what it means for her all these years later. Still, isn't that what we yearn to be? For others to see our living faith? If Luke told her story maybe it would have been in bright mountain top grandeur. Likely it was a small ordinary room, maybe plastic chairs around a worn desk when a dazzling radiance filled the space they shared, how they saw one another. Glorious!

After I told that story in Wednesday prayer, she quipped in a glimpse of greater depth: So, I'm not the only one reviewing a long life, seeking meaning, purpose, peace? And another woman recalled her work with youth in troubled circumstances—revelation she saw, illumination she felt called to be. Really, she said, holy presence so often begins with simply listening so others know they're loved. Glorious!

You see, friends, here's the good news in Luke's luminous narrative accent; and in Paul's enlightenment. When our journey ahead takes us to the darkest places, these holy moments, these sacred encounters, these visions of what life can be in Christ's love will beam light to guide our way; and just maybe help others see who they can be. We accept the invitation to take time to see and turn to blessing.

And so, a bleary-eyed parent cradles a beloved child in dark hours of night. After two years of pandemic weariness, teachers go again to listen to eager minds, broaden learning horizons, and maybe give a hug if that's what's needed. While other front-line workers stock shelves and serve customers, helping when some item can't be found, persevering when frustration or unwarranted abuse abound. First responders answer the call with their light flashing and sirens blaring. As in courtrooms and storerooms, in offices and factories, in apartments and sidewalk pavement, in City Hall, school theatres, and church sanctuaries, we work together for transformation trying to be the change God wants, as we set our face, our hearts to follow Jesus' way.

Finally, dear friends, a moment to seek where is Divine Glory in the smoky skies and murky hearts as war eclipses ordinary life in Ukraine, as it still lingers over Cameroon, Afghanistan, and so many other places not in the news. It's hard not to feel a dark shadow of fear, uncertainty, anger, sadness spreading again over the

world 30 years after an Iron Curtain lifted. Among schoolteacher mothers no making Molotov cocktails, still we envision fire fighters and emergency personnel like Quentin Curtis working overtime, maybe even in the firing line. Sanitation workers and ordinary citizens sweeping up shards of broken glass, amid the dust of rubble and twisted metal. Adults caring for older parents, and younger children of their own. One person helping another as together they try to sleep, find a meal, seek shelter. And we do not turn our eyes away. We stay awake, stay aware of others' suffering, and with prayer, share willingness to bear a cost at the pump, grocery store, and wherever else in life—an inordinately small price relative to those who pay the greatest cost as loved ones are lost, if it means some determined non-violent response can try to bring justice and peace. And in the same loving power that emptied Jesus' tomb, we trust even a seemingly empty vessel will be full, light dancing, bearing witness to what lies beyond.

Oleg Karpyak reports from Kyiv: I talked to a lonely passer-by with a cane who limped in the direction of a 1000-year-old Orthodox monastery and until recently a popular tourist attraction. His name is Ivan. He lives right next to the Ministry of Defense. We both understood what that means for him and his family. Ivan has an elderly cousin staying at home who used to be a Soviet soldier in the 1980s and returned from Afghanistan with both legs amputated. Ivan was heading to get food for them both, grateful the monastery was still offering it for people in need. I'm struck, Karpyak concludes, that when you talk to strangers now the conversation flows as if between two people who've met many times before. No awkwardness, no suspicion, no excessive politeness.ⁱⁱ

The way I see it, dear friends, it's holy authenticity of care, compassion, goodness, generosity, indomitable hope and determination. Luminous Loving Divinity transfiguring common humanity. That's what I want to be! Glorious!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082250093/program-in-chicago-attracts-more-minorities-into-the-fire-house>

ⁱⁱ Oleg Karpyak for the BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-60517447?>