

I am a good Midwestern boy. Born in St. Louis, I've lived in Rockford Illinois, the north Chicago suburbs, Dayton, and the heart of the Midwest itself, Columbus, Ohio. I know Midwest winters well and have come to love them. For three years, Sarah and I lived in Orlando, and if you don't know, winters in Orlando are the worst. It's just one sunny, 75-degree day after another, with very little rain. Sounds nice, right? Here's my question: what does that weather teach your soul about the struggles of life? For those of us blessed to live with gray, cold winters, we have the privilege of learning that life isn't just sunshine and roses. Life also includes clouds and cold, snow and wind. Cold winters can feel like they will last forever, yet the promise of warmer days is always around the bend.

Think about it this way, if George Harrison had grown up in Miami Beach instead of Liverpool, he would never have written, "Here Comes the Sun."

Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter
Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun (Doo-d-doo-doo)
Here comes the sun
And I say, "It's alright"

If George only knew sunny days, he would never have celebrated the return of the sun after the long, cold, lonely winter, and the world would never have known this amazing song. We only appreciate beauty when we've known suffering, and part of how we endure suffering is by having seen and tasted beauty. That's what the Transfiguration is all about—an experience of extraordinary beauty that will give us what we need to endure great suffering.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples witness a beauty they had only dreamed of. What exactly happened? How long did it last? Who knows? The whole event is shrouded in mystery, and it all takes place on a mountain. Matthew has three mountains in his Gospel: one at the beginning, which is where we've been the last few weeks in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There is another mountain at the end of the Gospel after the crucifixion and resurrection where Jesus will give his greatest promise of all, to be with us always to the very end of the age. In the middle is the Mount of Transfiguration. That's where we are today. We've skipped from the beginning of the story, straight to the middle in preparation for the end.

Lent begins this week, where we follow Jesus on a 40-day journey to his death and resurrection. Tradition says that the transfiguration took place 40 days before the crucifixion, which is why we recognize it on the Sunday before Lent. It is one the lesser-known high holidays of the church, yet one we need. After all, we live in the middle place, between our own beginning and end. That's what it means to be alive, to be caught somewhere between our beginning and our end. The Mount of Transfiguration is that liminal space where we glimpse a glory that will sustain us for the difficult road ahead. Because one way or another, struggle comes for us all. The only question is, how will we respond to struggle?

Our story begins, "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves." You might wonder, six days later than what exactly? Good question. Just before this story Pete confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Jesus responds by saying, "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my

church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it!” Incredible! Jesus promises to build a people upon Peter’s confession, a people that will overcome death itself. But before they overcome death, Jesus says they must go through it. **You see it’s not just Jesus who is going to die. Eventually, we all will.** The path to victory first goes through defeat, first suffering, then glory, death before resurrection. What is true of Jesus is true of us as well. The life of faith is a life of paradox, where seeming opposites belong together. Peter didn’t like that. He wanted glory without suffering, victory without defeat, life without paradox. But Jesus assures us that is the way, and there is no other. It’s six days after all this, that Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain by themselves.

There Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. In this extraordinary moment, the disciples see who Jesus really is—the light of the world. It’s not just a metaphor. Jesus is the radiant, shining light of divine glory, and he is beautiful. Moses and Elijah show up too. Together they stand as representatives of the entire Biblical tradition, the Law and the Prophets. Jesus, as we know, has come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them, to complete their work once and for all, so that humanity might be restored to our intended purpose, that we too might be revealed as the light of the world. That’s what this is all about.

Most reflections on the transfiguration focus on Jesus and how his divine nature is revealed through this event. The takeaway of the story is that Jesus is the divine son; therefore, we should listen to him, which is exactly what the voice from the cloud says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” We heard these same words at Jesus’ baptism repeated once again, now with the addition of, “Listen to him!” I think that’s what **being a Christian is all about—listening to Jesus**, with our ears, our hearts, our minds, our hands, our time, our wallets—that all of who we are is oriented toward listening to Jesus.

Sadly, the church has often forgotten this most basic orientation or ignored it completely. The church’s greatest harms have come about because we’ve failed to listen to Jesus. Whether it’s our sad history of antisemitism and colonialism, our support of the Crusades, the African slave trade, or racial segregation, or in the present day the church’s suppression of women and the LGBTQ community, none of this came about by listening to Jesus. Nothing Jesus said or did can ever be used to justify oppression. Nothing. You can point to other scriptures to be sure, but not Jesus. And that’s the whole point of Moses and Elijah being on the mountain. God is telling Peter and the rest of us, if you perceive a conflict between Jesus and other scriptures, always listen to Jesus. It’s that simple. If the church had simply done that, our history of oppression would instead be a history of liberation. It’s not too late to change our own history if only we listen to Jesus.

When we listen to Jesus, we see the glory of the divine shining through him, for he is the light of the world. But that’s not all there is to this story. God didn’t send Jesus just so we would see the divine light in him. God sent Jesus that we might see the divine light in him, and in everyone else as well. Remember, Jesus came to complete the work of the law and the prophets, and that work is that we might love our neighbor as ourselves, that we might see the divine light in all people, even in ourselves. Remember what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world, so let your light shine!”

The work of the Transfiguration is to **see God's light everywhere we look**, even when it's cold and gray out. It's learning to trust the light of God's love shines on us all, even when we are suffering, even when the world appears to be falling apart.

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Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun (Doo-d-doo-doo)
Here comes the sun
And I say, "It's alright"

The life of faith is a life of paradox, where seeming opposites belong together. Loss and victory, death and resurrection, mountain tops and valleys, through it all we remain God's beloved children in whom God is well pleased.

The last few weeks at the Adult Forum, we have been blessed to learn about Islam from Lubna and Mohammad Ahmad. They have taught us about this great faith tradition that is so often misunderstood and mischaracterized. While I have only read small parts of the Koran, I have enjoyed the poetry of the fourteenth century Sufi mystic Hafiz for several years now. I read a poem of his this week, and to me it sums up the work of the Transfiguration perfectly.

One day the sun admitted,
I am just a shadow.
I wish I could show you
The Infinite Incandescence
That has cast my brilliant image!
I wish I could show you,
When you are lonely or in darkness,
The Astonishing Light
Of your own Being!

Beloved, the light of God shines in Christ, but not just in him—also in you. When the long, cold, lonely winter gets you down, and it feels like years since it's been here, remember the sun is already shining in you, in me, and everywhere you look.