TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“The Unveiled”* 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Today is a very special Sunday in the life of the church. It’s *Transfiguration Sunday.*

I would not be too very surprised to hear that most of us are not terribly well aware of it of *Transfiguration Sunday* nor its significance*.* We tend not to make a space for it in the life of our church, but really in the life of many churches. I think it is because it comes just before the beginning of Lent. It is the Sunday before Lent starts.

In earlier years in Christian circles, the whole focus would have been on preparations for Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday. Fat Tuesday, of course, is more commonly known as Mardi Gras, and has especially overshadowed all other Christian related observances inasmuch as Mardi Gras celebrations are about as wild and extravagant as it is possible to get.

Additionally, if it was not Mardi Gras taking-up the attention and efforts of many Christians, then it is the self-sacrificial aspect of Lent that many people have embraced over the years. During this time of the year, many people have (and still) busy themselves with thoughts, prayers, and preparations concerning what they are going to “give-up” for Lent. What is going to be “sacrificed” during this time—is it going to be chocolate or red meat, this year?

Many of these pre-Lent traditions have their foundation in the Roman Catholic Church. However, Protestant communities throughout these past five-hundred years have also endeavored to prepare themselves and their homes for the coming season of Lent. Perhaps you and your family still practice some of the pre-Lenten traditions that have been a part of the preparations for Lent for many years.

This is a good thing. However, with all of the pre-Lenten activities going on, I suppose it is no wonder that *Transfiguration Sunday* gets lost in the shuffle. And that is too bad because it is an important part of the story of Christ. Indeed, it is one of the most hopeful of the stories we remember about him, and Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ transfiguration is one of the most important pieces of wisdom he has passed on to the church.

You see, the transfiguration provides a window through which we can see the whole of the Christian story may be viewed. One Anglican theologian, J. W. C. Wand, wrote several decades ago that “it is actually possible to regard transfiguration as the fundamental idea in the Christian religion and as placing in a nutshell the whole story of the individual Christian life as well indeed as that of society as a whole.”

This is what Paul is telling the church in Corinth in this part of his second letter to them. It is important, also, to remember the many trials Paul had with this church. In his letters to them, he is constantly having to reestablish his authority within a church that has deviated from the ways he has taught them, and has challenged his right to instruct them.

Despite the tension between them, Paul has not given-up on them. In this part of his letter he is urging them to remember who Jesus is and the way in which he was transfigured on Mt. Tabor. In that story—which we find in the synoptic gospels—God surrounds Jesus with two of the greatest characters of the Hebrew Bible: Moses (who brought God’s Law to the people), and Elijah (who represented God’s continuing voice, guidance, and presence among the people through the work of the prophets).

Jesus meets and communes with them as an equal. Like Moses in the Hebrew Bible [Ex. 34:30] in the story where his face shone with such brightness after meeting God, Jesus’ face—indeed his face and his clothes—begin to shine with a brightness that radiated God’s glory and shone even in the bright light of the daylight sun.

What makes this event so important, Paul is telling the Corinthians, is the implications it has for them and their life of faith and righteousness, and it all centers on Paul’s knowledge and understanding of the story of Moses and the veil Moses began to wear after his meetings with God.

Referencing Exodus 34, Paul writes about how when Moses entered God’s presence, whether on Mount Sinai or in the inner tent of the tabernacle, the experience physically transformed him—his face shone with the glory of God. And every time the people saw this they asked Moses to cover-up. It sacred them, and so they asked him to wear a veil so they would not have to be confronted with the change God can have on a human being.

According to later Jewish tradition, as time passed Moses’ face began to returned to normal. Once again, Moses was just like everyone else. He could no longer lay claim to something of God’s glory for himself, and at that point he began to worry about what that might mean for his own standing among the people. So, Moses began to put on the veil, not to *hide* the transforming glory of God but to *hide the fact* that that glory had *left* him.

It is precisely at this point that Paul sees the story of *Moses*’ veil as having important implications for the followers of Christ. Instead of criticizing Moses for what might seem as an act of deception, Paul suggests the Israelites had in a sense transformed the veil that Moses wore to their own eyes.

Paul is saying that because the Israelites could not bear to see God’s glory in *Moses*’ face, this prevented them from being able to see, and even not *wanting* to see the even greater glory of *Chris*t*’s* face [vv. 15-16]. Just as they refused to be transformed as Moses had been by God’s glory, so now with the coming of Christ “their minds were hardened” [v. 14] against the message of the gospel that could have transformed them “from one degree of glory to another” [v. 18].

But what Paul wants the Corinthians to know is that despite human reluctance, God has—once and for all—lifted away the veil that separated us from God’s glory, and this lifting of the veil results in transformation or transfiguration, *even for us!*

“And all of us, with veiled faces, [writes Paul] seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed …” [v. 18].

We are new creations in Christ, Paul says in this same letter [5:17]; that is, we have undergone a real and lasting change.

As unveiled and newly transformed people we continue to behave with the good counsel the Law gave us—that is: with common sense, with due respect and obedience to the moral laws of God and our faith. However, we do so not from obligation, but because it is now what we do. Through the love of Christ, we now respond with love. Through the Holy Spirit, love is now what defines us, it is who we are.

Through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, we have been touched with the love of God. We have been touched with the power of God’s love. Thus, we are unveiled—we live in the glory of God’s love which is the Risen Christ. And the most amazing thing about love is its ability to remake and renew everything it touches. It is in the context of this new, unveiled life in Christ that we can now continue our ministry.

Paul writes, “We do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.” [4:1-2]

That is our good news! As we enter Lent, “We do not lose heart.”

Next Sunday, we will be together again in our Sanctuary. It has been a while and we have all grown really very weary. How easy it has been over the past twenty-four months to lose heart!

Therefore, on this *Transfiguration Sunday,* I pray we welcome Paul’s message to the Corinthians—the Corinthians who gave Paul so much head- and heartache. Despite this, he still had hope for them because of the work of Christ and the Spirit. How much more can this mean for us, too?

Yes, our way of life has been radically altered. But we do not lose heart. Instead, we continue to work in the vineyards of the Lord, as those who have been unveiled, and see, as in a mirror, the ineffable glory of God. May this be so. Amen.