

## Sermon: Transfiguration - Ian Malcolm – February 11, 2018

It's always a privilege to speak from this pulpit, and now, on this Transfiguration Sunday, an honour to speak to this new congregation to which Rosalind and I belong, a congregation that's begun the journey toward its own transfiguration. A Biblical scholar would be able to clarify and interpret for you the details of Christ's expedition up the mountain with Peter, James and John, their experience of the blinding light of Christ's transfiguration, their witnessing his becoming the living Word of God, their glimpse of the Kingdom that is coming in Christ, their return from Epiphany down the mountain toward Lent, with the shadow of the Cross looming. But a lay speaker like me has a different role than that of scholar-explainer. I want instead to consider the idea of Transfiguration as *we* might encounter it amidst the duties, and responsibilities, and confusions of our own, ordinary lives. If Transfiguration is defined as "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state", then we can see the ways in which the possibility of witnessing Transfiguration – or, even better, experiencing it! - appeals to us as a magic alternative to the sometimes overwhelming details of our own lives – the details which touch and shape our existence. The yearning to witness and experience and be transformed by the beauty of a newly discovered truth is at the heart of *every journey* we undertake, and the challenge of that next mountain to climb, with the view promised to us if

we can achieve its peak, has at its heart the promise of our own change – our own growth – the possibility of our achieving beauty and harmony in our lives.

As a wilderness traveller, I'm drawn to the details of a journey toward transfiguration. Like *any worthwhile* expedition, it needs *planning*. If we're about to tackle the mountain, we have to 'suit up' properly. It's best not to try to climb the mountain in our city shoes, wearing our everyday garments. The changes we'll encounter – in climate, in terrain, in physical effort expended – require that *we 'change' in various ways*. We cannot need to remain exactly who and what we were before we undertook the journey, because we will encounter physical and emotional challenges that overwhelm our 'before' selves. We have to embrace not only the 'changes' of sensible planning and preparation (the apparel, the map, the compass) *but the 'changes' of a new attitude* – a 'mindfulness', a 'living in the moment' in which we recognize and accept each nuance of the new terrain, the new climate, the enlarging vision into which we climb, so that we can correlate what we *actually see* with the data of our map, and redraw it if necessary.

Embracing those necessary changes is difficult at times, even when we wish to succeed in our journey, and it's never more difficult than when we are required, in changing, to let go of *familiar circumstances* which *comfort* us, and which seem in their comforting presence to be *necessary, and eternal*. If the familiar seems to

become the necessary – if our habits become our values, so that what we’re used to seems to be the only reality we can accept - then the changes which a journey requires become threats. We think we’re moving too fast, and slow our pace to be more comfortable. We’re more exposed to the wind, and we’re chilled by the colder temperature. We find reasons for hesitating, for procrastinating, for seeking an easier path – for turning back to seek reassurance in the familiarity of landscapes and attitudes which have already become part of the past.

The verses from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians speaks to this state, I think, when Paul describes the truth – the gospel – being hidden to those who are ‘perishing’ – or in another translation, ‘lost’ – perishing, if not literally, then in the sense that they have become ‘lost’ by becoming unable to follow the map of their journey, to move forward in search of the new truth.

But let’s continue to be drawn forward. We climb toward – what? We don’t know. Then we encounter the brilliance of light, the moment of a clearer vision of a larger vista. Our yearning for the discovery of new understanding, draws us toward the light. Now the story recounted by Mark shows us the experience of Peter, James and John, as they accompany Jesus up the mountain. They see Jesus, enveloped by blinding light, with Elijah and Moses – a vision in which the past and present are brought together in a harmony that thrills Peter. “We should

stop here!” he seems to say, “we should build temples right here to preserve and honour - [and, I suppose, worship] - this vision.”

We understand Peter’s impulse at what seems like the ultimate moment of a journey – the awe-inspiring experience so far outside the scale of ordinary, everyday experience, that we say to ourselves, or to one another, “let’s just stop now. This has to be the ultimate truth I (or we) have been seeking. It can’t get any better than this!” But we know in our hearts that this can’t be all there is.

Archivists, historians, worshippers of the past, are among us, and we learn from them, but the past is not the whole truth. The future beckons. Our journey must continue.

And of course we’re still far up the mountain. And – [and Mark’s account of the journey continues to be valuable to us] – the voice of God speaks as the vision vanishes. *There is only Jesus, their fellow-traveller, their leader. “Hear Jesus” Peter, James and John are told by the voice of God.* I hear that as the command to *“Be open to the Truth!”* They follow Jesus down the mountain. And then they are charged by Jesus to tell no one of the things they had seen.

What? How can that be? We travel toward the new vision of the truth – and it’s a blinding light, and as we continue past the moment of light to descend from the peak, to return to the more familial lowland meadows of our everyday experience, we’re *cautioned not to speak of what we have seen?*

That's an interesting challenge - rebuke, even – in this age of endless electronic self-advertisement. We know that we've become a culture obsessed with posting online the selfies of our latest experience of truth. We're beginning to realise that the moment of shouting in a photo or video "Look at what I've done/where I've been/who I've met!!" can easily morph into the diminution of mere vanity. But what about the possibility of conveying the truth to others, so that they can benefit from what we've experienced? Not to speak of what we've experienced seems to be a denial of our responsibility to educate one another, and especially to educate the generation that succeeds us . . . Why must we re-invent the wheel? Why can't we learn from someone else's experience? Shouldn't we teach one another about the journey? What's the point of experiencing a transfiguration if we can't use it as the energy of learning, and teaching?

But we begin to realise that this journey is not simply the experience of tourism, a spectator's entertaining glimpse of the new, but a journey *toward the truth* which has to be personal, which *has to be rediscovered* personally in every age. I like to think that implicit in Mark's description is the sense that, in time, Peter, James and John will make their own journeys up their own mountains, either alone or as leaders of other small groups, and that they will caution their followers in turn not **to talk about** what they've seen – not to write the travel book, or go on the lecture tour, or post the self-congratulating selfie, - but instead help others to see how to make their own journeys, through landscapes which have not been

smoothed, and re-engineered, and littered with garbage, by legions of tourists who want the journey made easier.

And this journey we're on together – toward the experience we hope for, of a blinding light that will reveal to us . . . what, exactly? We know that in the time before this we had many questions about what the journey might lead us to understand. Which worship traditions we should share and which we should gently set aside? Which building? Which name? But now we know that we've begun to set these questions aside. They don't apply any more. . . because as we climb this mountain we're realizing that these are not what we seek. We're not trying to answer questions – We're seeing the familiar with new eyes. We're experiencing a new series of landscapes, revealing new prospects, new possibilities. . . We're breathing the fresher air, and we're drawing more oxygen into our lungs as we climb, effortfully, toward a new understanding, for which we pray devoutly. We're helping one another along the way. We're beginning to leave familiar signposts behind, and beginning to realise that the old maps don't define the new terrain as thoroughly as we might wish. We focus on the details of what we're *actually encountering here*. One new detail of this journey is the music that's accompanying us – and we're all learning that our hymn books contain beauties and truths that we haven't experienced for a long time, if ever. It's thrilling to explore this music with new eyes and ears, and to share our exploration, in Voices which are truly becoming United.

We're also seeing, with new eyes, two beloved buildings and the urban landscape which connects them, and beginning to imagine new and fulfilling purposes for them and ourselves. We'll discover a new vocabulary for worshipping which is suggested by our new state of mind. And, most specially, I think, we'll continue to forge new and binding links of friendship as we consult the map together, share with one another the beauty of our rediscovered landscape, speak - and sing and share - our faith. We're finding ourselves in one church, illuminated by a shared understanding of divine harmony and Christian wisdom, comprehending our existence in a new way, experiencing the power and harmony of God's embrace, as it touches and enlarges our spirits.

And – in a realization which comes from Jesus's charge to Peter, James and John - we won't speak of what we have discovered. Instead, we'll **show** the world around us what we have learned. We'll teach by example. We'll **live, and demonstrate** the new harmony, the new accord, the new wisdom which we've achieved, in the purposefulness and the joy of our actions as a congregation. We will be a light shining for our community. We might be someone else's experience of transfiguration! What a journey this is promising to be!

Let us pray.

*God, we give thanks for the imagination which prompted our journey and which continues to sustain us,*

*And for the friendship which binds us all together in our travel toward the truth;*

***we pray** for the vision which will reveal the light of truth to us;*

***we embrace** the energies of **faith and love** which will sustain us in our journey;*

***we commit ourselves** to living the truth which we will discover.*

***Help us** find the strength within ourselves to **make** the climb together.*

*This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.*